# RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

JAN. 20c

FEATURING

STEVE REESE IN

## WAR ON WALKING M

AN EXCITING ACTION NOVEL

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

20c WAR ON WESTERN JAN. 1952

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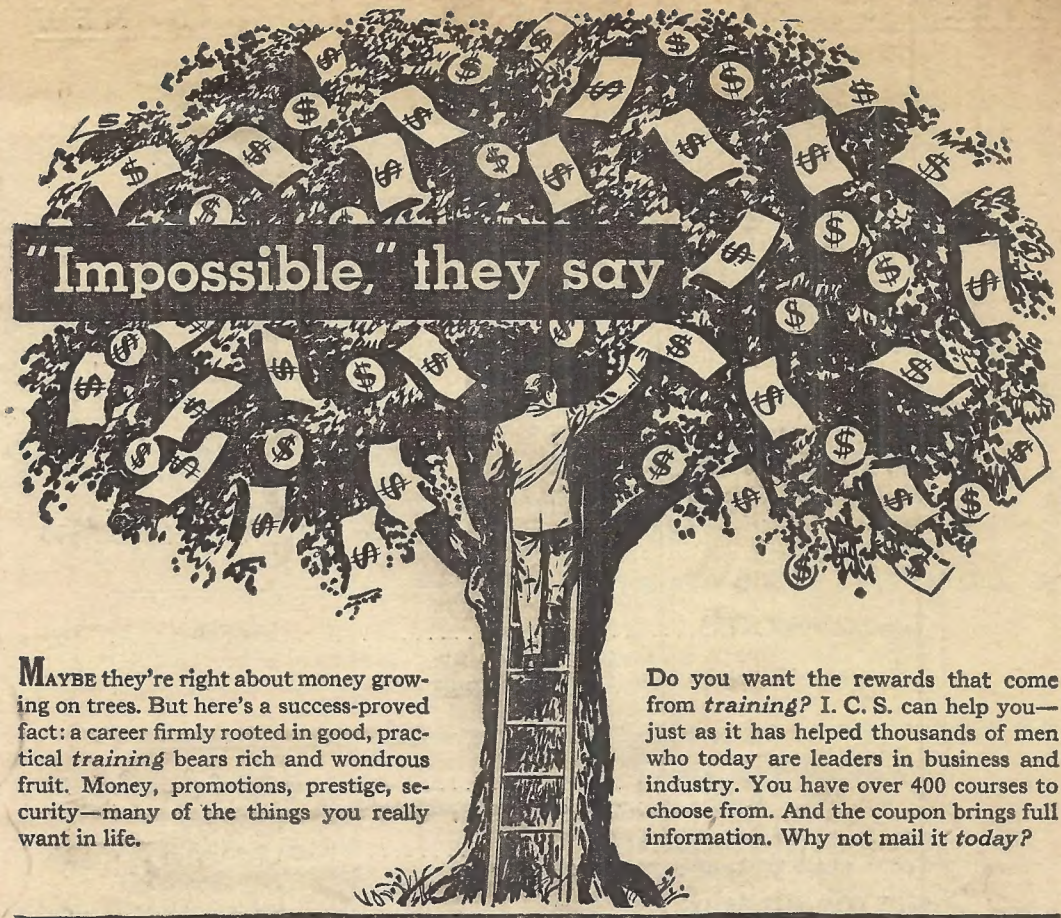


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# RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JANUARY, 1952

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*When rustlers and killers plagued High Mesa, three range detectives came riding in—carrying some sure-fire antidotes in their holsters* 10

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**MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor***

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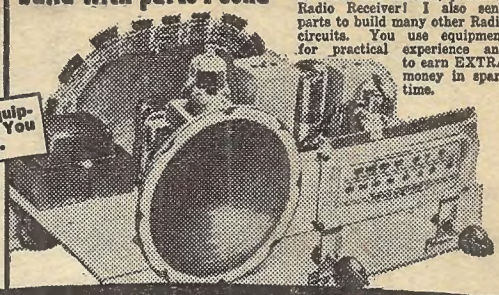

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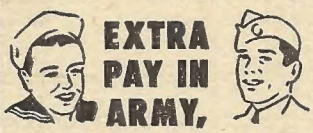
"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.



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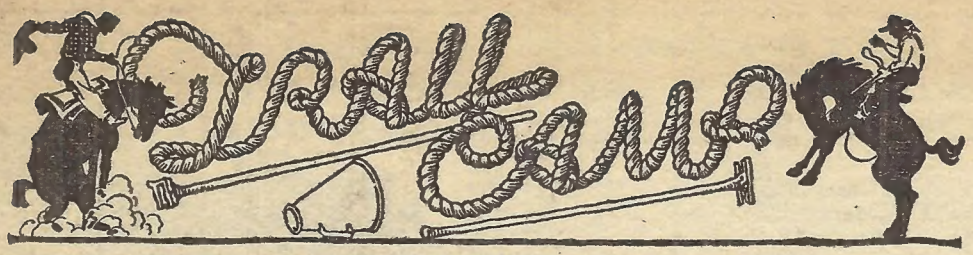



# DETECTIVES OF THE EARLY WEST

By HARRISON HENDRYX

DETECTIVE work is not generally associated with the Old West, but there was plenty of it practiced there. "Trailing" was the word the Westerners had for it—but certainly its function and purpose were based on detection, so who's to quibble?

The Mountain Men, who were really the first of the white race to ply their trades in the West, developed trailing to a fine art. They had to, if they were to keep their hair, outnumbered as they were by untold thousands of Indians.

As Jim Bridger put it, "The only way a white man can keep his scalp in Injun country is to tie it to his brains. And them that's too short on brains to make the tie—well, they'd just better not go sashayin' anywheres west of St. Joe."

Bridger, the best known of the Mountain Men and who later gained additional fame as a scout for the Army, attributed his longevity to the fact that he always kept his eyes and ears open on hostile ground, and his fires smokeless.

"A man stops noticing things, like bent grass or rock scratches or a night-owl hootin' in the daytime, and next thing he's got is a bloody head," said Bridger. "But it ain't just the catching of sign that keeps a man his hair, either—it's knowing how to add it up. You got to figure it right to know which way to jump. You guess wrong on what some broke twig tells you and you'll likely step out of the shallows into hat-deep water."

### *Obsidian Arrowheads*

A good scout had to know the habits, dress and psychology of every tribe he was apt to encounter in the territory assigned to him. The value of such knowledge is obvious, yet perhaps its importance can best be realized through an incident in which Jim Bridger and an unidentified Army man ran across a string of obsidian arrowheads while crossing a great shelf of rock.

Bridger knew that they originally came from an obsidian cliff in a section that is now part of Yellowstone National Park. This was the stamping grounds of the Crow tribe, but Bridger also knew that in times of peace between tribes the Crows would reluctantly trade a few of these precious obsidian tips to other tribes. Here, however, were too many to have been spilled from the faulty pouch of any but a Crow who had easy access to them, he reasoned.

"Probably some white trapper dropped 'em from his curio bag," the soldier guessed, thoughtfully weighing one of the heads in his hand. "They're too valuable to any Indian to have been wasted this carelessly, aren't they?"

Bridger shook his head. "Excitement will make an Indian careless—when he's hot on the hunt, say, or on the warpath. And no white man would have been carrying that many heads, unless he'd got holt of them from some Crow for tradin' purposes. And a trader would be loaded heavy and with a string of shod pack horses, chances are."

The soldier studied his own backtrail, noting the tiny scruff marks the shoes of his horse had occasionally left on the rock surface. "I see what you mean. It's an Indian, then. Hot after some venison, likely."

Bridger grinned. "I kind of figure it the other way. Indians. A war party of 'em."

He was right, of course, as subsequent scouting beyond the rim of the rock ledge proved. They found a worn-out Crow moccasin that had been discarded and the tracks of many unshod horses, none of which was accompanied by the mark of a dragging lodge pole. Peaceful Indians would be prepared to set up lodges. Warring Indians didn't worry about a roof over their heads.

### *Eluding Pursuit*

Despite the high degree of efficiency to which the Mountain Men developed trailing, most of them would admit that even the average Indian buck could outshine them at eluding pursuit. The Apache was particularly noted for his ability to lose trailers, with the Sioux

running a very close second in that department.

There were all sorts of tricks from this side of the game, too, such as riding over hard rock or snow-free ice, water riding (following the almost unchangeable bed of a stream) taking to the trees in forest country, doubling back, sending the horse on alone, and walking backward to confuse the trailer as to the direction in which the quarry was headed.

To the veteran trailer these tricks became routine, and when the trail petered out through the use of such subterfuge on the part of the pursued, the trailer had to depend heavily on what he had learned of the psychology of all fleeing men or animals as balanced against what he knew of each particular quarry's psychology.

For example, a water rider would in most cases leave a stream upon the same side as he'd entered it. The chances were that a man who took to the trees to obliterate his trail on the ground would likewise leave the forest upon the same side as he'd entered it, thus reversing the direction of his flight.

Nor would the competent trailer long be fooled by a man walking backward, for the imprint of the heels would be greater in this case than the normally deeper imprint of the fore part of a man's feet. And a riderless horse would soon be recognized by its tendency to waiver from the fixed course a rider usually held it to.

An expert trailer was frequently called upon to use his senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch. The latter, though used the least, was sometimes invaluable in determining by the amount of warmth in the bed of a campfire how long it had been since the quarry had paused there.

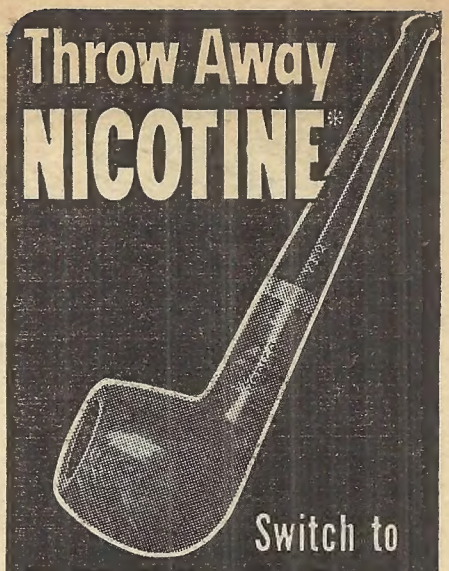
The sound of guns, no two calibers of which registered alike, could be correctly interpreted by well-trained ears. The burnt-hide smell of an Indian encampment, coming downwind, had unquestionably saved the lives of more than one veteran frontiersman.

### *Sight the Chief Asset*

Sight, of course, was the chief asset of the trailer. It was through this sense he could follow tracks, could tell whether the quarry was walking or trotting, lame or spry. Through his eyes he could spot a foreign material carried by hoof or stirrup to some unaccustomed place, could tell by the graying disintegration of a broken branch and the progressive blackening of blood spots just how old they were. He could observe and take warning from the reactions of disturbed birds and animals, and note the direction in which a blade of grass was bent by a careless step.

Far too numerous to mention were the capabilities of these early trailers, but from just what has been set down here, do you not agree that the West has had quite a passel of first-rate detectives?


Throw Away NICOTINE*



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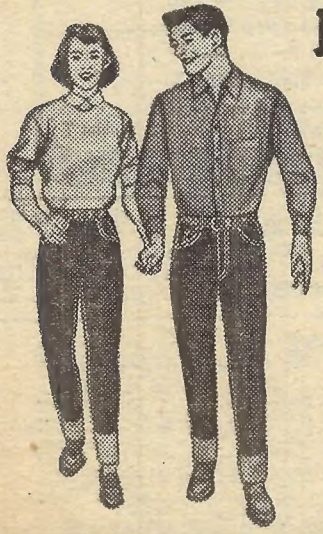

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# Ranch and Range

## *Little Known Facts of Cattleland*

ALTHOUGH IT cost $5 to mail a letter via Pony Express in the year 1860, this popular delivery system was a complete bust financially. As a matter of fact, its three owners lost over $400,000 on the celebrated venture. But the reason wasn't due to complaints about the service—for the system succeeded in sending letters east in a scant six days, as compared to the month that it took the ordinary stagecoach—if it was lucky.

What's more, only one solitary mail pouch was ever lost, while 30,000 letters were delivered successfully after being carried over 650,000 danger-ridden miles—which included either blizzard, flood, mud, alkali dust, rustlers or hostile Indians, or a combination of them all.

Yet curiously enough, the eighty "men" who rode the mails were all boys between the ages of 14 and 20, who were venerated by everybody as they galloped into town in their bright red shirts, blue pants and extremely fancy boots. Their reputation for "clean living" was famous, because they were under oath neither to swear nor drink, and had to tote small pocket Bibles wherever they went. Additional equipment for each included a hunting knife, two Colts and a trusty loaded Winchester. The salary? $50 to $150 per month.

### *Easy Street?*

THE operating expense of the Pony Express, as borne by the owners, Messers. Russell, Majors and Waddell, was terrific. They had to set up and maintain 190 way stations. Four hundred persons were required to man them and tend them. Five hundred horses, the fastest obtainable, had to be purchased at the very fancy price of $200 apiece.

"Nevertheless," said Majors to the others, as he signed the checks for the bills at the beginning of the venture, "we're going to get every cent back, and more. As a matter of fact, I confidently predict that we three will be on Easy Street forever."

However, less than two years later, as things actually turned out, they were all stone broke. And to add to the irony, the man with such high hopes eventually became so thoroughly poverty-stricken that he was completely supported throughout his old age by his once-youngest employee, Buffalo Bill Cody.

Who could have foreseen at the start of the venture that eighteen short months later the first transcontinent telegraph would be successfully completed and send out the news quicker than the speediest horse?

### *No Peace*

THE SEMINOLE INDIAN tribe has never signed a peace treaty with the United States and, legally and technically, is still at war with this country!

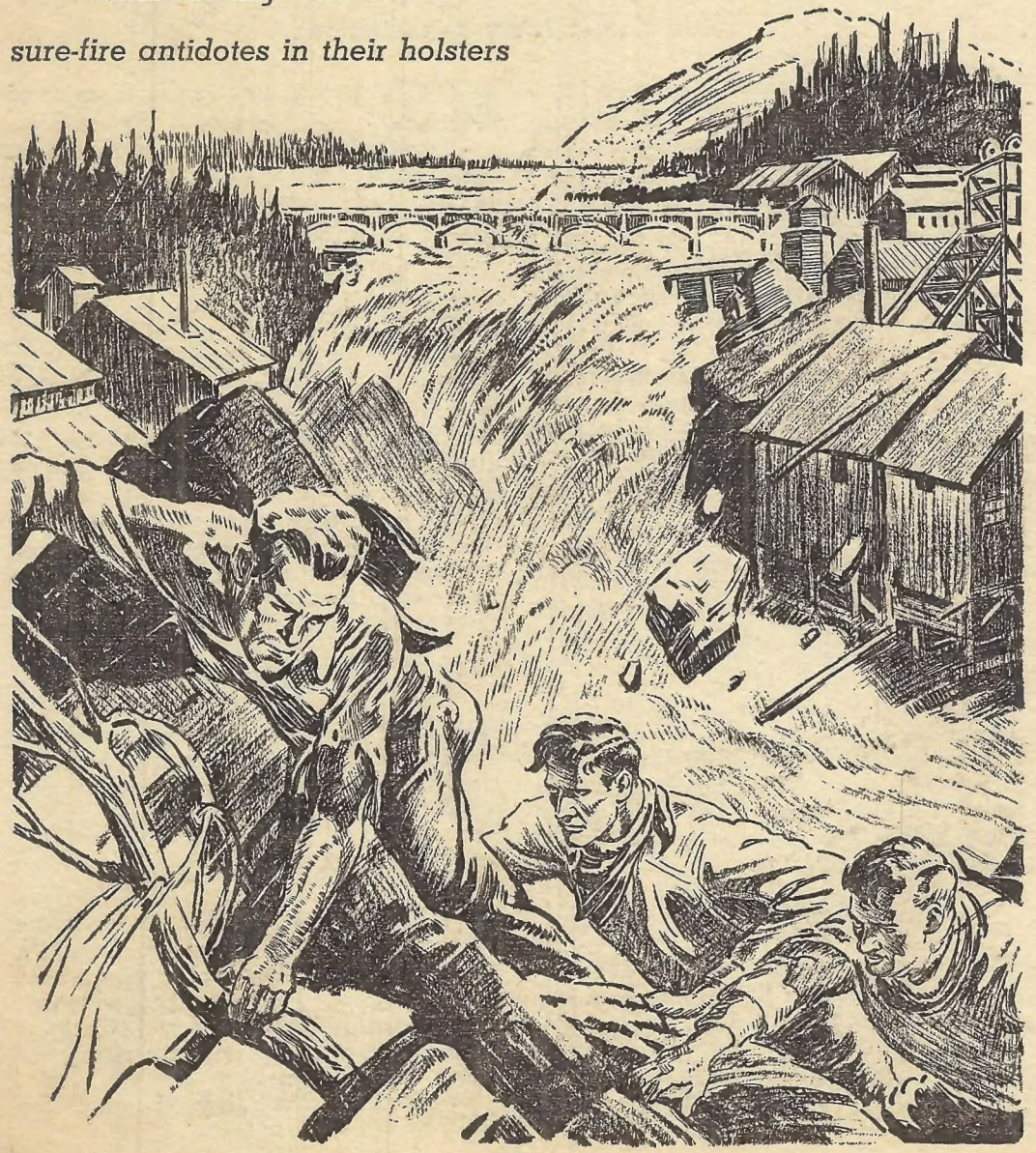
### *Movie Redskins*

WHEN Director Howard Hawks came to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to make a new Western movie, he had to take a hundred studio-made Indian costumes with him. It appears that the Crow and Blackfeet redskins who will appear in the picture no longer can furnish war bonnets, buckskins and moccasins. They own only blue jeans, woolen shirts and boots!

A Steve Reese Novel by **WALKER A. TOMPKINS**

# WAR

*When rustlers and killers plagued High Mesa, three range sleuths came riding with some sure-fire antidotes in their holsters*



# on WALKING M

## CHAPTER I

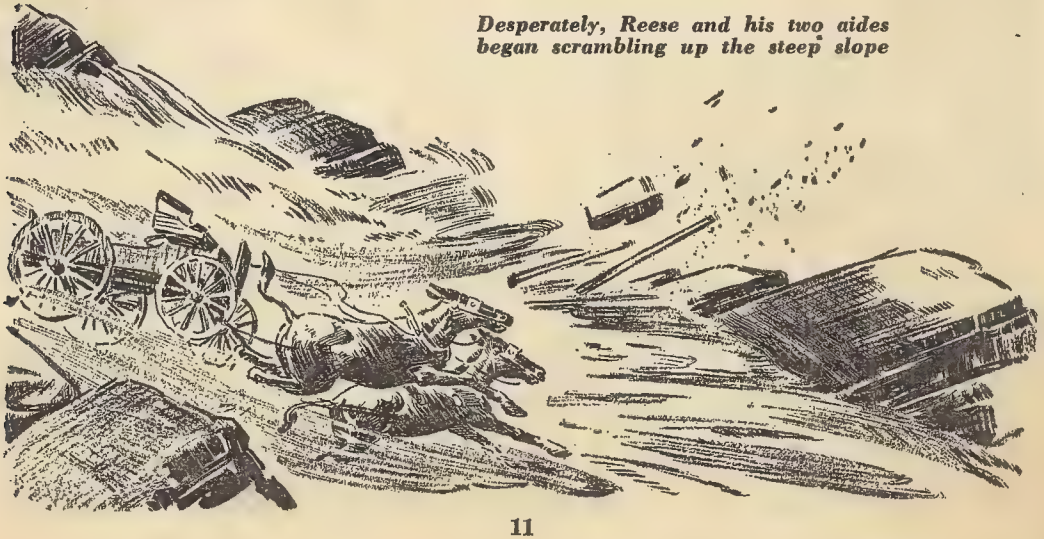
*Trio From Texas*

BY DAWN the mixed freight and passenger train had left the outer reaches of the desert. Helped by a booster engine, it began the torturous looping ascent of the Cascabel foot slopes. By ten o'clock it had gained the lofty plateau where cattle ranches flourished on range which looked deceptively barren.

Steve Reese, field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, eyed the limitless expanse of High Mesa from the window of a day coach, recognizing it as a land which might soon hide his unmarked grave. Providing this Arizona assignment which was sending him and his two lieutenants to the Walking M Ranch was as dangerous as CPA headquarters in Austin, Texas, predicted it to be.

Colonel George Beauvine, Reese's superior, had been bluntly candid about the prospects, as was his custom when dispatching his trio of top operatives on a case such as this at the Walking M.

"A local sheriff, his deputy, a Federal marshal, and one of our own Association detectives have tackled this mystery ahead of you, Doc," Beauvine had said. "They haven't been seen since. That is why I deem it necessary to send you and Hank and Dusty to the Walking M as undercover men. Incognito. Drifting saddle tramps, see? Hal Munger, the owner, has the idea that any man who displays a law badge openly on the Walking M is signing his own death warrant. So take over from there—and good luck. You'll need it."



***Desperately, Reese and his two aides began scrambling up the steep slope***

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*Trio From Texas*

BY DAWN the mixed freight and passenger train had left the outer reaches of the desert. Helped by a booster engine, it began the torturous looping ascent of the Cascabel foot slopes. By ten o'clock it had gained the lofty plateau where cattle ranches flourished on range which looked deceptively barren.

Steve Reese, field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, eyed the limitless expanse of High Mesa from the window of a day coach, recognizing it as a land which might soon hide his unmarked grave. Providing this Arizona assignment which was sending him and his two lieutenants to the Walking M Ranch was as dangerous as CPA headquarters in Austin, Texas, predicted it to be.

Colonel George Beauvine, Reese's superior, had been bluntly candid about the prospects, as was his custom when dispatching his trio of top operatives on a case such as this at the Walking M.

"A local sheriff, his deputy, a Federal marshal, and one of our own Association detectives have tackled this mystery ahead of you, Doc," Beauvine had said. "They haven't been seen since. That is why I deem it necessary to send you and Hank and Dusty to the Walking M as undercover men. Incognito. Drifting saddle tramps, see? Hal Munger, the owner, has the idea that any man who displays a law badge openly on the Walking M is signing his own death warrant. So take over from there—and good luck. You'll need it."

***Desperately, Reese and his two aides began scrambling up the steep slope***

# The Mysterious Destruction of a Mighty Dam

During his years as field chief for the CPA, Reese—"Doc" as he was known to his intimates, because of his college training and his former job with the St. Louis police force, before coming West as a range detective—had never undertaken an assignment with less to go on than this one.

Hal Munger's Walking M Ranch abutted the high Cascabel range which overlooked this mesa. The nearest settlement was the mining camp known as Bigstrike, on Indian River. A mining syndicate had ten years before erected a vast earthwork dam across the river canyon at Bigstrike, resulting in the formation of Bonanza Lake.

The impounded waters of this lake, if used for irrigation purposes, could transform the bulk of High Mesa's cattle range into farming country. Such a prospect inevitably drew sodbusters to such a land, and big cattle outfits like Munger's Walking M could go bankrupt if their leased graze should be opened for homesteading.

AT ANY rate, tragedy and death had been stalking Munger's ranch for the past several years. Entire herds of cattle had been stampeded over the rim of Indian River canyon, to drown in the slowly rising waters of Bonanza Lake. Outriders for Walking M had been mysteriously bushwhacked. Some well-organized force, it would appear, was bent on forcing Hal Munger into bankruptcy.

"Nesters have long had their eye on the mesa lands under lease as cattle range to the Walking M," Colonel Beauvine had told Steve Reese three days before in his Texas office. "So far the mining interests which control Bonanza Lake have refused to allow their water to be used for irrigation purposes. But if Munger goes broke and his leased land becomes idle, the Government is bound to open it to plow. In that case, Bonanza Lake water could be preempted for irrigation purposes by the legislature. And according to Munger, High Mesa isn't fit for farming, even with irrigation. A few years under the plow would ruin it for anything, even sheep. Farmers could reduce High Mesa to a desert."

Whether or not land-hungry nesters were behind the mysterious depredations on the Walking M Ranch, Hal Munger was a duespaying member of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, and therefore entitled to call upon the Association for help.

"You are Munger's last resort, Doc," the CPA president had said. "Financially, his back is to the wall, unless the Government renews his lease on High Mesa this fall. The situation is ripe for crooked land promoters to needle the legislature into taking over Bonanza Lake water under the 'public welfare' clause of the Constitution. So you can see that this case goes far beyond your solving the mystery of a few disappearances. The very salvation of one of Arizona's finest cattle-raising areas is in your hands."

The wood-burning locomotive was speeding toward the looming Cascabel Mountains at a mile-a-minute clip now. Within less than an hour Hal Munger would be meeting the three range detectives at Bigstrike.

Bonanza Lake's shimmering waters became visible under the northward haze—a river gorge brimful behind its dam. Reese knew by this landmark that the train was actually crossing the Walking M's Government graze now. The ranch itself was located between the lake and the sheer cliffs marking the base of the Cascabel range.

Reese had never met Munger. All he knew about him was that the old man was a widower with a twenty-year-old daughter. Reese, with Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, his two aides, would literally be starting their investigation from scratch.

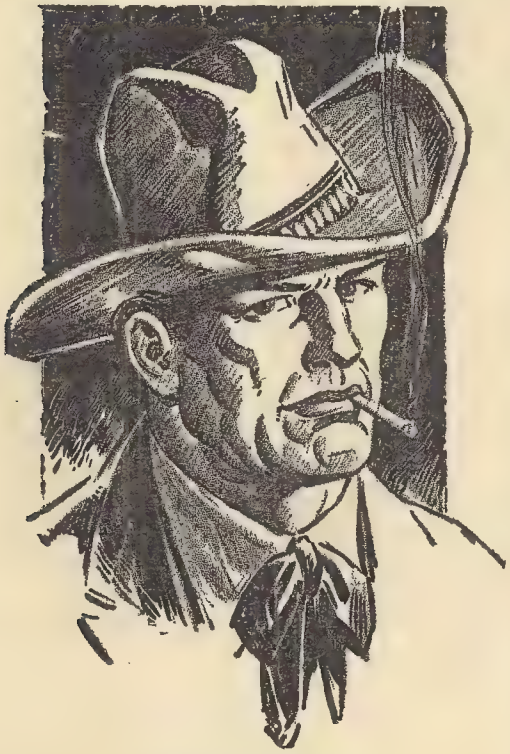
For three miles the train skirted the south rim of the man-made lake. Then, westward, they caught sight of their destination at track's end—the boom camp of Bigstrike.

"Keep an eye out for Hal Munger," Reese told his men. "He'll be wearing ranch duds and he'll know us by the same. Let him make the first overture, though, in case spies are watching."

The train came to a halt beside a seedy-

looking depot. Some fifty passengers alighted from the two coaches, mostly miners in their red shirts and hob-nailed boots. Which made Reese's party easy to spot as range riders.

Bigstrike was past its heyday, but it was still a flourishing copper-mining center. Dominating the town was the big rampart athwart the canyon, Bonanza Dam. In order



**STEVE REESE**

to tap the rich deposits of porphyry and conglomerate down the canyon, this dam had been necessary to hold back the raging flow of Indian River. The town had taken root on both rims of the canyon, linked by a red-leaded cantilever bridge which predated the dam.

As copper camps went in the West, Bigstrike was typical enough. Saloons outnumbered other business houses ten to one. Fumes from the Bonanza Syndicate's smelter stacks had denuded the roundabout area of all vegetation, its haze fouling the otherwise crystal purity of the air at this seventy-six-hundred foot elevation.

"Not a soul in sight who looks like a rancher," Reese commented, after sizing up the station loafers. "We'll stroll up town. Munger is sure to spot us in his own good time."

THEY obtained their sacked saddles, bedrolls and warbags from the baggage master and headed aimlessly along the saloon-fronted street of Bigstrike. Although this was the heart of a vast cattle land and Bigstrike catered to outlying ranchers' trade, the three strangers looked conspicuous amid the miners, freighters and townsmen on the street. All three wore Stetsons, blue work shirts, bullhide chaps and spurred Coffeyville boots. The fact that double shell belts supported holstered six-guns at their thighs meant nothing in this country where a man would feel undressed without his artillery.

Physically, the three CPA operatives were husky specimens, all in their late twenties or early thirties. But there the resemblance ended. Each was in sharp contrast to his mates.

Steve Reese was a ruggedly handsome man whose coal-black hair was beginning to silver at the temples, lending him added distinction. Joshua Jeremiah Trail—to give Dusty's baptismal name—was a moon-faced, rotund individual running to flesh in the mid-section, which, coupled with the frankly innocent stare of his baby-blue eyes, gave him an air of indolent insouciance which concealed the fighting trim of the man. The third member of the range riding triumvirate, Henry Hanscomb Ball, was a blue-eyed redhead, with the lusty, good-humored personality which went with his type.

Shouldering their warbags and sacked saddles, the three would be ticketed anywhere for out-of-work cowpunchers hunting a ranch where they could rent their ropes. Their Association badges were carefully concealed on their persons. All three knew only too well that if their true identities became

known here, they would be marked for target bait by the mysterious forces of evil which seemed bent on the destruction of the Walking M as a cattle outfit.

A buckboard was hitched in front of the Miners' & Stockman's Supply warehouse. As Reese and his two *compadres* drew near they were quick to spot the Walking M brand on the mule team hitched to it. Hal Munger's brand had also been stamped on the side of the wagon box with a hot iron.

Dusty Trail paused, ostensibly to light one of his foul-smelling five-cent cigars which he was rarely without. He was borrowing a match from Steve Reese when an oldster whose face was half-hidden by a brush of badger-colored whiskers emerged from the mercantile store and sauntered out toward the buckboard, his arms burdened with an assortment of packages.

Dumping his load into the Walking M vehicle, the old fellow turned to size up the three strangers in cowboy garb.

"Just a second, *amigos!*" he called out, as Reese and his partners started to pick up their belongings to resume their trek down the mining camp street. "You hombres looking for a bunkhouse to hang your John Bs in, by any chance?"

Reese lowered his sacked saddle to the plank sidewalk and met the oldster's eyes with a friendly grin.

"Reckon we are, mister. Just got off the rattler. Heard they was ranches up this end of the mesa who might be hirin'."

The old man sized them up critically, noting their rope-calloused hands, their sun-bronzed complexions. Telltale clues to the fact that these bowlegged strangers were more accustomed to the saddle than to trains

"I'm Hal Munger," the old-timer introduced himself. "Own the Walkin' M on the far side of the lake. Thirty a month and found suit you—on the guarantee you'll see me through the fall beef gather?"

For the benefit of passing street traffic, Reese and Hank and Dusty appeared to be considering this proposition. It had been prearranged that the harassed owner of the Walking M would get in touch with them upon the arrival of their train in Bigstrike, in as off-hand a fashion as possible.

"Reckon you've hired some hands, Mr. Munger," Reese finally said. "I'm Steve Reese, this roly-poly galoot is Dusty Trail, and the brick-top is Hank Ball. You might say we're saddle bums. Though we lost our horses in a poker game couple weeks ago out Socorro way."

Munger, walking with a pronounced limp in his right leg, hobbled over to shake hands with the trio from Texas.

Lowering his voice, he said, "Put your possibles in the buckboard here. I'll send you out to the Walking M in the wagon. Just to make sure it don't look suspicious, I won't go with you. I'll take a short-cut on horseback acrost the dam and be at the ranch when you show up."

The three Association operatives loaded their belongings in the Walking M buckboard and paused for further directions.

"Foller this street down into the canyon below the dam," the brindle-whiskered rancher said. "Mile down the canyon you'll pass the Discovery shaft house. Watch for the side road leadin' north about a quarter-mile below the mine diggin's. That's the Walking M road. Keep them mules movin' and you'll hit the spread in time for supper."

Without further comment, the old fellow turned on his heel and went stalking off.

Reese unhitched the mules while Hank and Dusty were quarreling over which would ride up front on the spring seat with Reese. The argument ended with the portly Trail making himself comfortable in the wagon box.

## CHAPTER II

### *The Silver Avalanche*

THE TRIO of range-garbed CPA men aroused no special attention on the part of the town's populace as they headed down Main Street in the buckboard. Beyond the western limits of the camp the street narrowed into a ledge road, barely wide enough for ore wagons to travel on their way from the down-canyon mines to the Bigstrike stamp mill.

"Wish I'd had time to stock up on stogies," Dusty Trail groused, as the wagon jounced deeper into the cliff-walled gorge. I'm liable to run out of smokes."

Hank Ball grunted. "Hope you do. I'd rather smell the fumes from that smelter back yonder than have to stand for your choice of tobacco." He feigned disgust, but Dusty only grinned, knowing it was pretense. His stogies were a long-standing cause of such arguments.

When the road reached the gravelly bed of the canyon, the CPA men saw that only a trickle of Indian River water was permitted to escape the big dam behind them. In other days, the river had raced ten feet deep down this gorge.

As Munger had said, a mile below the dam site they drew abreast of the Discovery shaft house. This being the noon hour, miners were assembling at a tarpaper cookshack for dinner.

There was barely room enough for the road to pass the shafthouse, and as it was the mules were splashing in hock-deep water from the dam's sluiceway. As Reese was tooling the team past the towering weather-grayed structure, a bald-headed man in his early sixties stepped out of a doorway to hail them.

"Notice you're riding a Walking M wagon," the mining man called out as Reese halted the mule team. "Goin' out to the ranch?"

"That's right," Reese said. "Munger hired us to keep his spread running."

The mining man halted at the edge of the shallow water.

"Takin' a round-about way to reach Munger's, ain't you?" he asked impersonally. "Easiest way with a wagon is to cross Iron Bridge, and hit due north across the flats."

Reese thought, "Better play this safe. Can't tell what information this hombre might be fishing for." Aloud he said pleasantly, "Munger's orders, sir. Me and my pards are strangers to this part of the country."

The mining man grinned. "Well, no matter. The thing is, my boy Harvey Lund works for Munger. Matter of fact he's goin' to marry Munger's daughter Susie come August. I'm Jake Lund, super here at Discovery."

Reese picked up the lines, eager to be on his way. Old Jake Lund called out quickly, "Susie's birthday is comin' up next week and my boy's got a mail-order gift for her. Would you boys mind takin' it out and givin' it to Harvey?"

Reese grinned. "No trouble at all, Mr. Lund."

Lund ducked back into the shaft house and when he came out he was carrying a brown-paper-wrapped parcel, which he tossed up to Reese. Then, wading out into ankle-deep water, Lund held up a gilt-framed tintype.

"This was taken by one of them rovin' photygrafters last summer," Lund said proudly. "The girl in the middle is Susie, and the young sprout with her is my boy. The old-timer is Hal Munger, the boss."

Impatient at the delay, nevertheless Reese's innate courtesy dictated that he humor the old man's family pride by looking at and commenting on the picture.

Leaning from the wagon seat, he was just taking the tintype from the old mining super's gnarled hand when the quiet of Indian River Canyon was rudely breached by a violent reverberating explosion.

THE concussion was heavy enough to make old Jake Lund reel in his tracks. But it was not a routine blasting operation at the mine.

The explosion had come from a distance, up-canyon in the direction of Bigstrike, a mile to the eastward.

It was the look of utter horror on Jake Lund's seamy face as he stared up-canyon toward the mining camp which made Reese and Hank Ball hip around in the buckboard seat to stare in that direction.

What they saw was beyond the realm of any nightmare which they had ever experienced.

From this angle, Bonanza Dam appeared as a great cliff of earthwork spanning the canyon from rimrock to rimrock.

Precisely in the center of that man-made barrier, a great eruption of smoke and debris was rising in slow-motion against the blue

sky. And on the heels of that blast in the heart of the dam's floodgates, came a great spilling flood of silver-green water, plunging into the canyon with a crescendo like thunder.

"The dam's been dynamited!" Jake Lund's squall of terror reached the CPA men's ears above the cataclysmic rush of falling waters. "Everything this side of it is going to be wiped out in a couple of ticks!"

It was true. Already, the sides off the fractured dam were caving in before the pressure of millions of tons of lake water suddenly released. No power on earth could stop that froth-flecked avalanche of green, watery doom.

"Run for your lives!" Jake shouted to the men in the buckboard as he started sprinting toward the Discovery cookhouse. "I got to warn my crew!"

Reese and his two lieutenants leaped from the wagon, their eyes transfixed in horror on the fifty-foot wall of water roaring toward them at express-train speed, tossing ten-ton boulders ahead of it like scraps of paper—a silver avalanche of doom.

There was no time to grab their personal belongings out of the buckboard. The waters of Bonanza Lake would be gutting this portion of the canyon in seconds, certainly less than a minute.

Alongside the Discovery Syndicate's shaft house was a steep sprawl of fractured rock, mine tailings representing a decade of burrowing in drifts, winzes, opencasts and stopes from the country rock in search for valuable schists and porphyry. Aside from that sprawling mountain of rubble, fanning out like the cast-off dirt of a gopher's burrow, the rest of the area was sheer cliff, impossible for man to scale.

With desperate haste, Reese and his two aides began scrambling up the roof-steep slope of tailings. They were roughly twenty feet above the mule-drawn vehicle they had abandoned when the crest of the flash flood hit the Discovery's bunkhouse and cookshack.

The CPA men felt a sick horror as they saw the raging waters crumple the flimsy buildings like cardboard. Momentarily they glimpsed struggling human shapes amid the boiling waters, like ants caught in a thundering millrace.

Fighting for foot and hand holds on the loose rubble, the three range detectives scrambled for higher ground. Seconds later they saw the tumbling comber of lake water strike the shaft house, shattering its planks into a jumble of matchwood.

The mules, sensing their danger, had started to stampede, braying piteously. Glancing over their shoulders, the horrified CPA men saw the corpse-laden flood waters overtake and engulf the Walking M buckboard, surging down-canyon at incredible speed.

Dusty Trail's round face went ashen as his weight started a small rock slide on the face of the tailings heap. His yell of horror went unheard under the organ-roar of the plunging waters as, inexorably, he began skidding backward toward the churning flood.

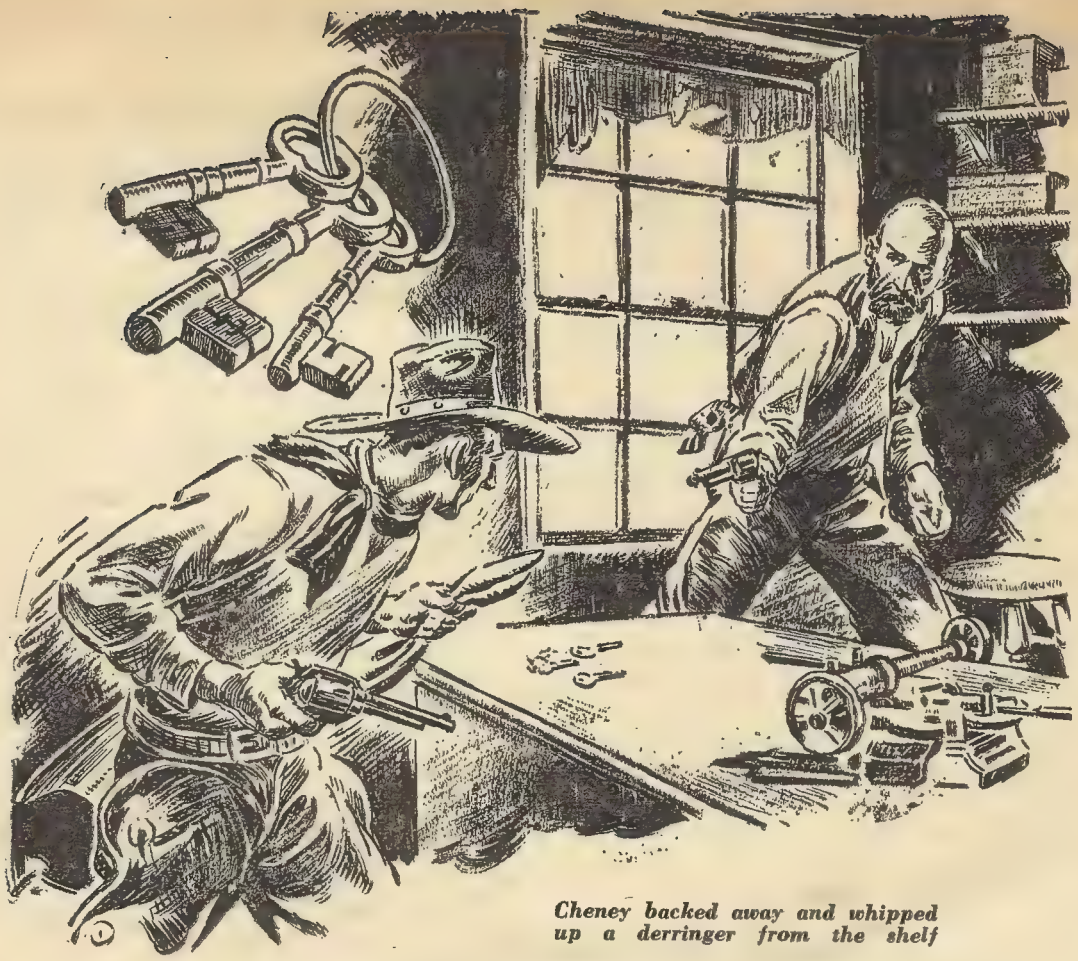
SPRAY dashed skyward from the heavy machinery the shaft house had contained and festooned back into the canyon, shot through with rainbows under the hot glint of the sun.

Steve Reese flung himself sideward, reaching out a hand to snatch at Dusty's arm, knowing full well that both would drown if Dusty's sliding descent was not stopped. A few yards higher up the slope, Hank Ball was clinging desperately to an out-jutting fragment of granite.

Reese felt the rock slide seize his own booted legs. Then he and Dusty came to a halt with their legs immersed in the racing waters.

Around them, all was chaos. Where the miners had been eating their noon meal was now a raceway of plunging water thirty feet deep. The debris of the Discovery's buildings would be scattered for fifty miles down the Indian River canyon in a matter of a few hours.

The two men plunged their fingers into the loose tailings as they felt the savage thrust of the current on their legs. The water was rising, or else they were slipping toward the wild flood.



*Cheney backed away and whipped up a derringer from the shelf*

Above them, red-headed Hank Ball was starting to crawl back to the assistance of his imperiled friends. Reese and Dusty shouted in panic, waving Hank back, but the fiery-topped buckaroo would not have heeded their warnings had he been able to hear them. Such was the bond of loyalty which welded these three rangeland riders.

Clawing for purchase on the rocks, realizing that he and Dusty were slipping inch by inch into the foaming current which sluiced between the canyon walls, Steve Reese stared up the gorge with his brain registering in an obscure fashion the last stages of the Bonanza Dam's destruction.

An earthwork fill rather than a masonry barrier, the big dam was being cleaned out as effectively as if engineers had planned its removal. Only the red-painted Iron Bridge, linking the two segments of Bigstrike camp together, remained safe above the destruction.

Hank Ball was almost within reach of his half-submerged *compadres* now. He was clinging to a thorny bush that had taken root in the tailings, holding out his booted leg for Dusty to grab them, when a great swath of undermined rock let go above them and rushed downward.

In an instant all three were under the plunging flood, being whipped by tangled cross currents out into mid-stream. When they fought their way to the surface, it was to find that they had been swept a hundred yards or more below the site of Discovery Mine.

The fluted granitic walls of the Indian River gorge were a blur on either side. The crest of the flood had been reached. They were the only living things being swept westward on its gleaming surface.

A slight lessening in the pressure of the current was all that kept the CPA trio from being pulled under. Like most men of the saddle, they distrusted water, and the fact that they could swim was a tribute to the qualifications which the Cattlemen's Protective Association demanded of their field operatives.

Instinctively, as they swam, they unbuckled their heavy gun harness and abandoned their weapons. The release of weight could spell the difference between life and death now.

The waters seemed to pile up in heaving mountainous shapes as the Indian River gorge made an elbow bend. Swimming, as such, was impossible under such cataclysmic conditions. They could only hope to keep their heads above water.

AND then, as a series of whirlpools flung them around the corner of the canyon without dashing them to pulp against the rock wall, the CPA men caught sight of a side canyon that opened out of the north wall.

That would be the wagon road to the Walking M. What lay beyond the side canyon they could not know.

Destiny was in control now. A vast maelstrom of lashing currents caught the three swimmers and flung them into the backwaters of the side gulch. Almost at once they felt a slackening of the current. The main flow of water was following the line of least resistance down the main gorge. They had been flung into an appendixlike backwater which, reaching a dead end, tended to flow back to join the main current.

With arms and legs slogging, the swimmers fought their way deeper into the side gulch. The roar of the ebbing flood was still ear-numbing. Risk of instant death was all about them from the jagged timbers of the Discovery buildings which had been thrown into this cul-de-sac.

## CHAPTER III

### *Picture Puzzle*

FAINTING with exhaustion, Steve Reese managed to wrap his arms around a massive twelve-by-twelve beam which had been snapped like a toothpick. The floating wood saved his life, gave him the precious seconds in which he could rest and recover his wind.

A few yards away, Dusty Trail had managed to grab hold of a manzanita snag and was drawing himself out of the water. Hank Ball, a bleeding gash cut in his scalp where a nail on a spinning board had raked his head, was only half conscious. Even as Reese spotted him, he rolled over and floated face downward in the boiling eddies.

"I'll get Hank!" Dusty yelled, spitting out the soggy remnants of the stogie between his teeth. "You keep paddling, Doc!"

Reese saw Trail's drenched bulk plunge into the water. In a moment the pot-bellied range detective had his arm crooked around Hank's head, pulling it out of water. Sinking, Dusty's boots touched solid bottom. They were safe.

The end of Reese's floating timber butted into solid rock and wedged in a fissured boulder. Letting his legs sink, the field chief found himself on a gravel footing in armpit-deep water.

Ahead of them a few yards, the twin tracks of a wagon road snaked up out of the water, following the canyon upward. Reese, joining Dusty, helped pull the limp form of Hank Ball up to dry ground.

A wet hem of muddy gravel told them that already the crest of the flood was dropping. By the time Reese had started artificial respiration on the redhead, the gulch behind them was a gurgling grotto of fast-draining waters.

Coughing muddy water from his lungs, Hank Ball regained consciousness shortly, thanks to Reese's long training in lifeguard

work in Missouri, prior to joining the Cattlemen's Association staff.

"Well," commented Dusty, fishing the sopping remains of two cheroots from his pocket, "it looks like I'm going to have to do without the solace of nicotine for a spell."

Hank Ball got to his feet, mumbling his thanks to Reese. He did not then realize how narrow his escape from drowning had been.

An interval of appraisal told the three men how lucky they had been. None had suffered broken bones or severe abrasions during their brief, hell-bent ride down the canyon's flood waters.

"Reckon there won't be any survivors at the mine," Dusty Trail said heavily. "I saw the water hit old man Lund like he was a matchstick. He didn't have a chance to warn his men."

Stephen Reese was stripping off his shirt to wring it out, revealing the muscle-slabbed contours of his husky chest and back. Blood was seeping from scratches and welted bruises on his flesh, resulting from collisions with the debris during their period in the flood waters.

"I'd say we were the *only* survivors," the CPA field chief said hoarsely. "Any miners at work underground have been drowned like rats."

A mutual distaste for remaining any longer in this dank side canyon impelled the three to start up the wagon road as soon as they had emptied the water out of their boots.

The beating sunshine was a welcome relief to their bruised and aching bodies. They sought out the shade of a smoketree off the road and sprawled out, panting like grounded fish. They were still unable to realize that death had not overtaken them down in the pit of the Indian River gorge.

FROM this vantage point they had a general panorama of the High Mesa sage flats, stretching off and away without the relieving accents of landmarks, the world's rim finally meeting the distant horizon in shimmering layers of heated air.

Bigstrike's smelter chimneys reared like tombstones above the ruined dar[illegible] At this distance, the jam of humanity on the Iron Bridge resembled a swarm of bees.

"Men," Reese said, "that dam was deliberately blasted. It was no accident. Heavy powder charges had been planted in the flood gates. You both agree to that, don't you?"

Hank and Dusty nodded. This was their first opportunity to think back to the genesis of the disaster.

"But why?" Dusty wanted to know. "The mining syndicate built that dam. They can't operate without it. And they wouldn't have destroyed it without clearing every living thing out of the lower canyon."

Steve Reese got to his feet and started exercising his bruised and throbbing muscles.

"I hate to say this," he said, "but it looks to me like the three of *us* might have been the target for that water avalanche, boys. Maybe my ego is working overtime, but if anyone at Bigstrike wanted to keep the Cattlemen's Protective Association from going to the assistance of the Walking M, they sure chose an almost sure-fire way to wipe us out."

Reese's lieutenants exchanged glances. The ramifications of their chief's suggestion were almost too much for the human mind to comprehend.

"Say—I just thought of something!" Hank Ball exclaimed. "That dam going out means that Bonanza Lake is no more. Colonel Beauvine said it took ten years to fill that lake, after the dam was built. It took three years to complete the dam. That means that—"

Dusty Trail cut in, "That means it'll be thirteen years at a minimum before irrigation water will be available to nesters on High Mesa. Amigos, it looks like our case has been solved for us. Farmers won't be coveting Walking M leases as long as there's no water available for irrigating."

Reese considered this startling angle of the situation at considerable length before speaking.

"We mustn't jump to the conclusion," he pointed out then, "that would-be sodbusters are back of this war on the Walking M. At no time did Hal Munger declare that to be

the case, in his correspondence with Colonel Beauvine, remember."

Hank and Dusty fell silent. The monstrous calamity which had ruined the Bonanza Dam had removed the threat of the Government opening the Walking M leased range for farming development, at least for more than a decade to come. But the fact remained that the dam had been intentionally destroyed—and it was hard to estimate how many human lives had been lost in the resultant flood down-canyon. This thing measured up to a criminal act beyond parallel in the annals of the Territory. Whoever had been responsible for dynamiting the floodgates must be brought to justice.

"I think," Reese said, "we had better head out to the Walking M and report, anyway. When the news gets out to the ranch, Munger will of course assume we died in the flood."

Hank Ball shuddered. "I just remembered," he said, "that old Jake Lund had a son working out on the Walking M. The job of telling Harvey Lund that his father was drowned will be up to us."

Steve Reese was cleaning out the pockets of his chaps. A rectangular object flashed in the sunlight, the nature of which momentarily puzzled him.

Then, with a low murmur of surprise, he recognized the metallic object. It was the gold-framed tintype which Jake Lund had passed up to him, simultaneously with the explosion back at Bonanza Dam.

IN THE excitement of leaping from the buckboard and heading for the safety of higher ground ahead of the watery avalanche, Reese had thrust the picture into his chaps pocket.

He wiped the tintype clean on a tuft of grama grass and held it inside the shadow of his own body, staring down at the picture. It showed a girl standing between two men, one a bald-headed oldster with a waterfall mustache, the other a raw-boned, grinning young cowboy of about twenty-five.

The girl was blonde, the shapeliness of her young body revealed in spite of the mannish attire she was wearing. Even allowing for the imperfections of tintypes, her likeness was one of an uncommonly pretty young woman.

Harvey Lund, son of the ill-fated mine superintendent of the Discovery Mine, was the young buckaroo with his arm around Susie Munger. Reese turned his attention to the old ranchman whom Jake Lund, with almost his last words, had identified as their own employer, Hal Munger.

Upon closer study, Reese discovered that the Walking M boss had lost his left leg at the knee. The stump of a wooden peg was visible under his bullhide chaps.

A note of excited puzzlement was in Doc Reese's voice as he handed the tintype over to his lieutenants.

"Have a good look at Jake Lund's photograph," he said. "It is supposed to show Susie Munger standing between her father and her fiancé. Tell me if you notice anything peculiar about that picture."

Hank Ball's cheeks ballooned as he emitted a long whistle.

"That Susie is a looker!" the redhead chuckled. Hank considered himself to be something of a lady-killer, and feminine pulchritude was one of his specialties.

"Don't forget she's engaged to marry this bronc-stomper—Harvey Lund," snorted Dusty Trail. "Hey! Look, Hank! This old-timer with the wooden leg—he ain't the Hal Munger who met us at the train this morning and turned that buckboard over to us!"

Hank Ball's jaw dropped in amazement as he scanned the picture of the Walking M rancher in closer detail.

"No, by grab!" Hank agreed. "That Hal Munger wore a thicket of badger-colored whiskers. He limped, but not on no peg leg!"

The two CPA operatives glanced up to meet Reese's drilling stare.

"Boys," their field chief said in clipped tones, "what it boils down to is that the 'Hal Munger' who met us at Bigstrike an hour ago was an impostor. The real Hal Munger has got to be the bald-headed, one-legged man in this tintype Lund handed me. And that fake Munger, don't forget, was the man who sent us into the canyon just ahead of that dynamited dam!"

For several minutes more, the three Asso-

ciation men continued to study the dead miner's tintype picture without speaking. It was beginning to dawn upon them that there was a solid basis for Reese's earlier hunch that the Bonanza Dam might have been destroyed with but one purpose in mind—to keep the CPA triumvirate from reaching the Walking M Ranch.

"But listen!" Dusty Trail objected. "Colonel Beauvine told us that Munger hasn't told a soul he was asking the CPA for help on this case. If that old-timer who was impersonating Munger was getting fixed to drown us, it would have to be because he recognized us as range dicks working incognito!"

Hank Ball said with indisputable logic, "Blasting a big dam, killing gosh knows how many innocent people—it don't make sense, Doc. If Munger's news leaked out, they could easy enough have bushwhacked us on our way down the canyon. In this side gulch, for instance."

Reese admitted the accuracy of Hank's deductions, but he was still not satisfied.

"Remember how Jake Lund was surprised to see us heading for the Walking M by way of the canyon?" he reminded them. "He said the direct route was across Iron Bridge, back at Bigstrike. The impostor posing as Munger must have had *some* motive for steering us into the canyon."

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Real Hal Munger*

STEVE REESE returned the tintype to his chaps pocket. His eyes were trained on the glinting windows and tarpaper roofs of Bigstrike camp, two miles away. Perhaps, at this moment, the man who had posed as Hal Munger was among the crowd of humanity jamming the deckway of Iron Bridge, overlooking the ruined dam.

"We have one big advantage in our favor," the field chief said. "Whoever dynamited that dam in an attempt to drown us—and I still think that is the explanation for draining the lake—undoubtedly believes that the three of us are dead. As long as he keeps on thinking so, his guard will be down."

Hank Ball finished wringing out his socks and tugging on his cowboots.

"Then we're takin' a pasear back to Bigstrike," the redhead inferred, "and scouring the camp for that badger-bearded stone-of-a peach, eh?"

Reese shook his head.

"I think we'd better head out to the Walking M and have a conference with the real Hal Munger," he said. "It won't be fun, walking that far in high-heeled boots, but there is a good chance that Munger can identify his impersonator from our description."

The three range detectives, very much aware of the fact that they were without weapons of any nature to defend themselves in the event of an emergency, started walking along the wagon road which headed in the general direction of the Cascabel range to the north.

It was rough going, especially since their kangaroo leather boots were beginning to shrink on their feet as a result of having been immersed in water. Blisters began forming on their heels and ankles before they had covered two miles of road.

The westering sun slid behind the granite teeth of the Cascabels to westward, bringing a welcome relief from the punishing Arizona heat.

Just at sundown they reached a fork in the road where a weathered signboard informed them that the Walking M was three miles distant on the right-hand fork. The other arm of the Y led to an abandoned mine camp in the Cascabel uplands, some forty miles away. Originally, then, this road had been for ore wagons, not as a route connecting the High Mesa cattle ranches with Indian River Canyon.

As dusk thickened, the three plodding CPA men saw considerable traffic on horseback, but always at a distance. Riders were shuttling back and forth from the Walking

M to Bigstrike, it appeared. By now, Bonanza Lake had probably been completely drained of its impounded waters, leaving Indian River to flow unobstructed along its natural course.

Hunger was beginning to torture the three, who had not eaten since daylight when the train had halted to take on water at a desert outpost. They regretted now having left Bigstrike without eating at noon.

Darkness fell swiftly over the Arizona landscape. Lights burst into bloom against the ebon backdrop of the mountains ahead of them. That would be the Walking M Ranch.

The three miles seemed more like thirty by the time Reese and his limping companions arrived at the ranch. A rustic gateway over the road identified the spread as Munger's, his Walking M brand having been worked out in wrought iron by some blacksmith in the past.

At this point another road angled off along a section line, heading toward the Iron Bridge in Bigstrike. By that route, the mining camp was an easy five miles away, downgrade at that. Obviously, the CPA men had been intentionally misdirected when they had been sent down the canyon road.

THE star-powdered heavens shed enough light for the three walking men to identify various buildings. Lights glowed in a long, adobe-walled, sod-roofed affair which was the bunkhouse, out in the direction of the barns and stock corrals.

Closer was a neat white-painted ranchhouse, which would be Munger's home. From it they heard the organlike tones of a melodeon in which someone was playing "Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes."

"We'll scout the main house first," Reese whispered. "For all we know, that badger-bearded hombre who met us in town this morning may work for Munger."

With as much stealth as they could manage, they climbed a stake-and-rider fence and crossed a velvety bluegrass lawn surrounding the house. Luckily the wind was against them, so their scent was not carried to the pair of collie dogs they saw romping on the front porch.

In the thick shadows alongside a cypress hedge, Reese led Hank and Dusty up to the wall of the ranchhouse. The parlor windows were open against the slow-ebbing heat of the evening, and below it the CPA men halted.

Through the window was revealed a rustic-furnished living room with a massive lavarock fireplace, mounted heads of buffalo and elk on the walls, Navajo rugs and coyote pelts on the floor.

A girl with lovely corn-colored tresses was seated at a melodeon to the right of the fire place. She was improvising now.

The musician was Susan Munger, daughter of the rancher; the tintype told the CPA men that. She was obviously in a somber mood, judging not only from her music, but from the fresh moisture on her cheeks which glistened in the light of a shaded hobnail lamp on the melodeon.

Then Reese caught sight of an old man sprawled back in a horsehide chair before the cold fireplace. A tall, cool drink was in his hand. He appeared to be asleep, or lost in deep thought.

The oldster's left leg was a wooden peg, resting on a footstool in front of him. He had a waterfall mustache and his head was almost totally bald, ivory-colored against the russet hue of his cheeks, as a result of wearing a Stetson.

"The old gent of the picture, Doc," Dusty Trail whispered. "That'll be the real Hal Munger."

Hank Ball nudged Reese in the ribs.

"I'm starving to death," he complained in a tense whisper. "Why don't we report and brace Munger for a snack of bait before I pass teetotally out, Doc?"

Reese shook his head. They were playing too desperate a game here to take any unnecessary risk. He had to make sure that Munger and his daughter were alone.

The girl ran an arpeggio on the keyboard and stopped pedaling the bellows which supplied air to the reeds. Turning away from the organ, she spoke to the old man in a voice stark with tragedy:

"But Jake *might* have been away from the mine, Dad. We just can't take Phil's word that every miner at Discovery was lost in

that terrible flood."

The old man set his untouched drink on a table bearing a stereoscope and a neat stack of *Cattlemen's Journals.*

"You can bet your bottom dollar, Susie," he said despondently, "that if Jake was alive he would have wasted no time riding out here to tell Harvey."

Susan Munger arose from the piano stool and walked over to kiss her father tenderly.

**DUSTY TRAIL**

"All those lives—snuffed out in a twinkling," her whisper carried to the three men outside the window. "But at least we know the Walking M is safe from nester invasion, Dad."

Hal Munger nodded gravely. "Yes. A terrible price to pay for our security, darling. But until they rebuild the dam—which they aren't likely to do—there will be no Bonanza Lake to draw water from."

REESE had heard enough to convince him that the coast was clear. He nodded and, without any effort at concealment, the three range detectives made their way between hedge and wall and mounted the porch steps.

The collies set up a violent clamor which brought Susan Munger to the front door at once. As she opened it, Reese and his companions stepped into the fanwise lamplight streaming across the porch.

"Toby—Spiffy—hush up!" the ranch girl silenced the snarling dogs. "Good evening, sirs."

Having lost their sombreros in the flood, the CPA men could only nod.

"Miss Munger? I am Stephen Reese of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. I apologize for our delay in getting here today. These are my co-workers, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail."

Susan Munger stood staring transfixed at the three men until her father had peglegged his way to the door.

"Come in—come in!" the old man said in a tired voice. "I wasn't expecting you. I sent my foreman Phil Cheney to town with the buckboard this morning to meet you. When he said no one answering your description got off the train, I decided you'd missed connections and wouldn't arrive for a week."

As the CPA men stepped into the living room, their minds held a single thought. Whoever Phil Cheney was, he was probably connected with the dynamiting of Bonanza Dam's floodgates today.

"We were on our way here in the Walking M buckboard," Reese said, "when the dam went out. The fact that we escaped is almost too incredible for belief, Mr. Munger."

Susan came out of her trance with an embarrassed laugh.

"Forgive my manners," she said. "Why, you look as if you had been through a terrible ordeal. Have you eaten?"

Hank Ball patted his stomach expressively.

"No, *ma'am!*" he said feelingly.

Munger turned to his daughter. "Rustle up some grub for these buckos, Susie. Sit down, gentlemen. You say you were on your way to Walking M in my buckboard? But that is impossible!"

The three range riders seated themselves on a sofa facing Munger's chair as Susan Munger vanished in the direction of the kitchen, followed by Hank's admiring gaze. A large framed photograph of her husband-to-be, Harvey Lund, occupied a prominent place on the fireplace mantle and sight of it made Ball assume a hang-dog look.

"Impossible?" Reese asked sharply. "Why?"

Munger seated himself in the horsehide chair and carefully propped his wooden leg on the footstool.

"Well," the Walking M boss explained, "Phil Cheney—he's my ramrod—drove into town to pick you boys up. I've been having trouble with my knee stump lately—lost my leg five years ago when a horse pinned me against a rock and gangrene set in before a medico got to me."

Reese and his men, hunger-goaded though they were, forgot their ravening appetites in their eargerness to follow Munger's words.

"Cheney left his wagon in front of a mercantile store some distance from the railroad station," Munger went on. "When the train from Phoenix got in, he didn't see you boys get off."

"There were about fifty passengers for Bigstrike," Reese said. "I can see how he would miss us."

"Well," Munger went on, "when Cheney gave you up and went back to get his wagon, it had disappeared. He thought it had been stolen, since he didn't see it anywhere in town. And as he was crossing the Iron Bridge on his way home—on a bronc he rented at a livery stable—the dam blew up."

"Yes," said Dusty Trail drily, his eyes on a box of cheroots on the mantle. "Uh—mind if I light up a smoke, Mr. Munger?"

"Help yourself, Dusty." Munger grinned. Then his expression sobered. "Of course, what happened was that you boys spotted my brand on the mules and the wagon, and took off."

Reese shook his head. He explained the true circumstances which had detoured them into the river canyon when Susan Munger came to the door and called them to the dining room.

## CHAPTER V

### *Walking M Ramrod*

MUNGER followed the three CPA men to the table, listening with growing consternation as Reese told him of the limping man in the brindle whiskers who in Bigstrike had posed as the Walking M owner. Hank and Dusty, leaving the discussion to their field chief, attacked the food which Susan had set out for them with a wolflike gusto.

When Reese had finished his story, Munger was silent. It was obvious that this information had been a bombshell to the peg-legged old cowman.

"Mr. Reese," Susan said hesitantly, "you say you—you talked to Jake Lund at Discovery?"

Reese nodded, pulling the tintype from his chaps pocket and handing it to the girl. She seized the memento as if she cherished it beyond price.

"I am sorry to tell you," Reese said, "that your fiancé's father was drowned in the flood. There is no possible doubt of that. Dusty here saw the wall of water hit him. He lost his own life trying to warn his miners in the cookhouse."

Susan's mouth twitched and tears sparkled behind her long curling lashes.

"Harvey left for Bigstrike as soon as he heard about the dam going out," she whispered. "He's probably scouring the canyon in search of Jake's body right now."

Close to tears, she left the dining room, hugging Jake Lund's treasured tintype to her breast.

Reese turned back to Hal Munger.

"Does the description of the man who impersonated you fit anyone you know, sir?" he asked.

The old man shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Can't say as it does, Reese. Men with badger whiskers and crippled legs are a dime

a dozen in any mining camp. Your description of this fake Hal Munger could fit a score of old jackleg muckers I know of."

Reese poured himself a third cup of coffee.

"Your foreman, Phil Cheney," he said gravely. "Does *he* match the description?"

Munger's negative head-shake was emphatic.

"No. Cheney is young, around thirty-five, and in perfect physical shape. Besides, Cheney has been my foreman for ten years. I trust him absolutely."

Reese said drily, "You must, Mr. Munger, to send him to town to meet three men whose identities were not supposed to have been known to anyone but yourself."

Munger's craggy face reddened.

"I realize that," he said, "but I tell you, Phil Cheney is my right-hand man. Since I lost my leg he's practically run the Walking M for me. Finding out who rustles our stock and bushwhacks our riders, to say nothing of what happened to the tin-stars who investigated this mystery ahead of you, is as keen a responsibility to Cheney as it is to me. He knows he will sink or swim with the Walking M."

Reese pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Cheney has gone back to town, I suppose, to be in on all the excitement of the dam going out?"

Munger shook his head. "No. I was talking to him out in the bunkshack not ten minutes before you boys showed up. Want to go out and see him yourself?"

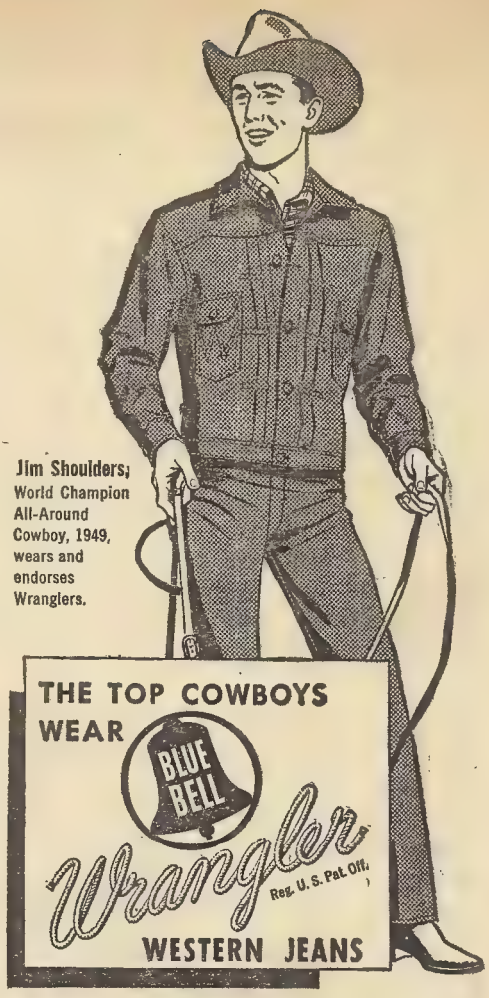
Reese said grimly, "Yes. I very *much* want to talk with this foreman about that stolen buckboard."

Hal Munger excused himself, to hobble out to the back porch in search of a lantern. Hank and Dusty, recognizing in their chief's serious mien a sign that he was on the track of a clue of some sort, took advantage of their host's absence to ply Reese with a few questions of their own.

"Look here, Doc," Hank Ball protested. "You don't think Munger's foreman was behind that dynamiting of the dam, do you?"

REESE paused in his thoughtful pacing of the room.

[*Turn page*]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"It's too early to say," he replied. "But look. When we got off the train at Bigstrike this morning, we sized up everyone around the station, didn't we?"

"Sure," agreed Dusty. "Especially anybody dressed like he was a rancher, knowing Hal Munger was supposed to be around to see us."

"Well," Reese went on, "we saw no one resembling a cowman waiting for the train. It was unusual enough for us to comment about it, and head on up town. This Phil Cheney told Munger he was on hand at the depot to meet us. There is reason to doubt that."

Hank Ball said carefully, "Of course he could have been watching the station platform from a depot window."

"All right," debated Reese, "I'll grant that. But he knew we would be dressed as we are, and toting sacked saddles and our warbags. Munger surely told him that much, seeing that Munger couldn't be on hand to meet us himself."

Hank and Dusty got the drift of Reese's deductions now. Of all the fifty-odd passengers who had alighted from the train at Bigstrike, only they fitted the description of the three men Phil Cheney had been sent to town to pick up.

"Before we even meet Munger's foreman," Reese went on, "we have reason to suspect he is a liar, if not guilty of something worse. Perhaps he was playing cards in a saloon when the train got in. Perhaps the buckboard *was* stolen by the impostor who told us he was Hal Munger. But—did Phil Cheney know that?"

Dusty Trail remarked, "The impostor came out of that mercantile store with a lot of packages. We can go to town and find out who he was, from the storekeeper."

Before Reese could answer, Hal Munger came stumping into the room with a lighted lantern.

"I don't think Cheney will be able to help you much," the old Walking M boss said, as the four men entered the living room on their way to the front door. "All he knows is that the buckboard wasn't at the hitchrack where he'd left it, when he got back from the station lookin' for you boys."

Not until they were out in the night, with Munger's lantern putting grotesque wagging shadows of their legs across the ranch yard, did Reese remember that neither he nor his lieutenants carried guns. An uneasy prescience of trouble stemming out of this meeting with the Walking M foreman lay in Reese's mind. He would have felt better going into this with a weapon at his hip.

Reaching the Walking M bunkhouse, Munger pulled open the slab door and stood aside as the three CPA men entered the crew's living quarters. Reese whispered to the old man, "Don't let on we're Association detectives, remember."

Munger nodded and followed them into the smoke-fouled interior of the bunkhouse.

Double-tiered bunks lined both walls of the long, narrow building. Most of the bunks were empty, their straw tick mattresses rolled up like snails to reveal rawhide-latticed springs. There were around thirty bunks, testifying to the size of Walking M in the days when it had been operating at full capacity. Munger had had trouble hiring crews of recent years.

Steve Reese's quick appraisal of the occupants of the room revealed only seven men now in the bunkhouse. Four were playing cards at a deal table, by the light of an overhead lantern. Another was cleaning out his pipe at the potbellied stove at the opposite end of the room. Two punchers had turned in for the night and were snoring peacefully in their soogans.

"Lookin' for anybody in particular, Boss?" asked the man at the stove, busy reaming out his pipestem with a broom straw.

"Yeah," Munger said. "Where's Phil?"

THE CARD players halted their game and looked at each other blankly.

"Here a few minutes ago," spoke up one.

The man over by the stove said through a yawn, "Cheney said something about going out to the barn to rub some screw-worm dope in his pony's hind leg. Got ripped on some bobwire."

Munger gestured to the three CPA men, who headed back outdoors.

"I'll fetch him for you," the rancher said.

Setting his lantern down, the old man cupped palms around his mouth and bellowed toward the nearby loom of a big board-and-bat haybarn, "Phil! Hey, Phil!"

After a moment's pause, a man's voice answered from the inky shadows between two smaller outbuildings in the opposite direction from the barn: "Yeah, Boss?"

"Come in here," Munger shouted. "Want to see you."

"Sure, Boss," Phil Cheney answered.

Reese moved closer to Munger. "He's not doctoring his pony's leg, is he? What are those two shacks?"

Munger shrugged. "Blacksmith shop and granary. I declare, you detectives get suspicious of the slightest thing, don't you?"

Reese did not answer. His ears were tuned to the night sounds. He could hear the jingle of the foreman's spur rowels as Cheney headed toward the lantern light. But was he only imagining that he heard another sound—a furtive movement in the dead grass alongside the blacksmith shop? Had Munger's cry interrupted Cheney in a conference with someone out there in the darkness?

Phil Cheney entered the circle of lantern glow. He was a tall, raw-boned man in his thirties, wearing a spotted calfhide vest, an El Stroud sombrero with a rattlesnake skin for a band, and square-toed Justin cowboots. The three CPA men observed that Cheney had a gun at his right flank, slung for cross-draw.

All three had the same thought. Was it not customary, after a day's work, to shuck your gun harness? Why should Phil Cheney be armed on an innocent trip to the barn to put medication on a pony's wire-torn hide?

Striding up to the group, Cheney's teeth glittered in an easy-going smile as he glanced at the three strangers with Munger. Reese could not be sure, but he believed that Cheney's easy smile masked a sudden alarm, as if he had recognized Munger's companions.

"Anything wrong, Boss?" Cheney asked, reaching in his calfhide vest for a sack of Durham and thin cigarette papers.

"No," Munger said in a voice pitched too low to carry to the men in the bunkhouse at their backs. "Phil, these are the three Cattlemen's Protective Association hombres you missed when the train come in this mornin'."

Munger's foreman paused in the act of shaking tobacco into a trough of tissue paper between his fingers.

"This is Steve Reese, the kingpin," Munger went on. "Dusty Trail, Hank Ball. My ramrod, Philip Cheney."

## CHAPTER VI

### *Destroyed Evidence*

CHENEY cast his makings aside as he shook hands with each of the three visitors in turn. Then he said, in a voice loud enough to send an echo from the blacksmith shop wall across the yard, "You're the missing range dicks, eh? When you didn't get off the train, I figgered you'd missed connections at Phoenix. Glad to meet you, boys."

Reese said sharply, "Don't talk so loud, if you please. We're supposed to be hiring on as ordinary riders." But the field chief was thinking, "If Cheney was having a powwow with somebody out there, he's sure tipped him off who we are."

"Sorry," Cheney apologized. "Tell me, how'd you get out here? You didn't spot the brand on my buckboard an drive off from Bigstrike, did you?"

Reese prodded Munger's elbow in time to silence the rancher.

"No, we didn't steal your vehicle," he said. "That's what we wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Cheney. Were you at the depot when we got in?"

Cheney began twisting himself another smoke. He appeared slightly flustered, but his next words explained that.

"We-ell," he admitted, grinning at his boss, "I admit I stopped in at the Congress bar for a drink. The train was a few minutes early. By the time I got back to the station, most of the passengers—including you three, I reckon—had drifted off."

Munger nodded somberly, his eye on Reese. Cheney's simple explanation for having missed the CPA men at the depot was reasonable enough.

"What did you do after you gave us up for missing?" Reese wanted to know.

Cheney cemented his cigarette with a swipe of his tongue.

"Went back to the Congress for another dram. Then I went over to the Miners' and Stockman's, intending to come back to the ranch here in the buckboard. But it was missing. Nobody had seen anyone drive it off, either."

Reese nodded, as if accepting this information at face value. Cheney wiped a match alight on his pants leg and fired his cigarette.

"Come on in the bunkhouse," the foreman said easily, "and I'll introduce you to the crew as new hands the boss has hired. Then we'll see about rustling up bedding for you."

Hank Ball said quickly, "Even drifting cowhands own their own bedrolls, Cheney. What makes you think we haven't got our own soogans?"

Cheney hesitated imperceptibly before answering, "Well, that makes it easier to pass you off as saddle tramps. Want me to introduce you around by your own names?"

Reese said after a short pause, "We'll have a little talk with Mr. Munger first, Cheney. When we show up at the bunkhouse we'll explain the delay by saying we went to the house to sign the pay-roll book."

Cheney nodded, his cigarette tip ebbing and glowing to the suction of his lips.

"*'Sta bueno.* And I wish you better luck than the other star-packers who've worked on this business, boys."

With a wave of his hand, Phil Cheney turned and headed into the bunkhouse, closing the door behind him.

Munger picked up his lantern and started in the direction of the ranchhouse. His path led him directly in front of the blacksmith shop and granary.

Hank and Dusty fell in behind Reese as the field chief walked quickly to overtake Munger.

"Douse your lantern, please," Reese whispered. "I—"

His warning had come too late. From the inky blackness of the junk yard alongside the blacksmith shop came the sudden ear-shattering roar of a double-barreled shotgun.

The lantern went out as a random ball smashed the chimney. Reese felt the beesting of a pellet of buckshot striking his left hip. The bulk of the shotgun's discharge had been aimed at someone behind him.

EVEN as Reese hauled Munger to the ground and spun about on his haunches, he saw Dusty Trail lurch, try to catch himself, then fall headlong in the dust. Hank Ball emitted a short, sharp cry of pain before he also dropped to the ground.

Over in the junk yard beside the blacksmith shop, Reese heard a jangle of metal. He scuttled fast in the direction of the ranchhouse with the intention of circling the junk yard to trap the unseen man firing buckshot there.

A twin stab of bore-flame ripped the darkness, throwing the rusty ruin of an old mowing machine into stark relief. Shooting blind, since his targets lay prone so that they were not silhouetted against the lighted windows of the bunkhouse, the gunman's second blast of buckshot screamed harmlessly through space and shattered two windows in the crew's quarters.

Reese heard Dusty's stifled moan, as the aide lay there in the dirt, and knew his roly-poly *compañero* was wounded, it might be fatally.

Given a gun, Reese knew he could have nailed the shotgun toter by firing a fast pattern of slugs at the bore-flash behind the mowing machine. Now the best he could hope for was to run down the bushwhacker before he could leave the junk yard or fire a third salvo of buckshot.

Leaping to his feet, Reese went charging into the junk yard. His legs struck an overturned plowshare unseen on the ground and he fell sprawling into a thicket of Russian thistles.

As he got to his feet, it was to hear a rataplan of hoofbeats making a fast getaway from the darkness beyond the blacksmith shop. The shotgun wielder was making his escape, heading due south in the direction of the twinkling cluster of lights that was

Bigstrike, five miles away.

But then the escaping rider was swinging away from those lights, to keep from showing himself against them. The rapid ebbing of hoofbeats on the road told Reese that their attacker had made his escape. It would take too long to saddle up horses for a chase, and trailing would be impossible in this darkness.

Reese picked his way back through a jungle of rusting iron, cast-off ranch machinery of all descriptions. Scant minutes had elapsed since the first gunshot blast, though it seemed an hour.

"Dusty—you hit?"

Reese shouted the words as he came free of the junk yard and ran over to where Hank Ball and Hal Munger were bending over the moon-faced detective.

The bunkhouse door was batted open, flooding the yard with light. By its glare, Reese saw that Dusty's left arm and leg were dripping blood from a score of puncture wounds. Had the full charge of buckshot struck him, death would have been instantaneous.

As it was, Reese knew that the unknown assassin had aimed faultily. His buckshot had streaked through the space between Reese and Munger, in front, and the other two men bringing up the rear. As a result, only random pellets funneling out from the shotgun muzzle had done any damage.

"I'm—all right," Dusty grated through his teeth. "You get stung—Hank?"

Blood was staining Hank Ball's shirt and there were buckshot perforations in the wings of his bullhide chaps, but like Reese, he had escaped serious injury. "I'm all right," Hank said.

Men were tumbling out of the bunkhouse now, led by Phil Cheney with a lantern.

"What happened?" Cheney shouted. "What was the shooting? Where'd it come from?"

A Walking M cowpuncher in his underwear, obviously one of the two who had been asleep, came running from the bunkhouse with another lantern. Reese seized it from the dazed puncher, then swung to Hank and Munger.

"Lefty, you and Pete lug this wounded man over to the house," Hal Munger snapped. "The rest of you get back in the bunkhouse. Somebody tried to bushwhack us."

HANK BALL

IT TOOK four men to lift Dusty off the ground, although he protested that he was able to walk. Steve Reese carried a lantern over to the area behind the dismantled mowing machine where he was positive the gunman had been standing at the time he fired his second blast.

The ground was open there. Lantern light winked on the brass casings of two blue-colored ten-gauge shotgun shells, which Reese pocketed as evidence. What interested him most, however, was a fine assortment of boot prints in the dust where the would-be drygulcher had been standing. They were hob-nailed brogans of a type a miner would wear, not spike-heeled riding boots.

These footprints had to be protected, to

prevent a breeze from obscuring them until they could be studied. Glancing about, Reese spotted a rectangle of wooden boards which had once been a door of some sort, judging by the rusty strap hinges.

Hanging his lantern on the mowing machine, Reese picked up the three-by-six foot door and carefully placed it over the footprints in the dust. Later he could come back and study them.

That done, Reese grabbed the lantern and sprinted for the ranchhouse. He arrived there in time to see Susan Munger snipping away Dusty's blood-stained pantleg with a pair of shears.

"I'll be crippled for a couple-three days," Dusty admitted, sweat-beads bursting from his cheeks. "Otherwise, don't worry, Doc. Who triggered that greener at us, I wonder?"

Hal Munger cut in, "This man needs a doctor's attention, Mr. Reese. I'll send a man to town as fast as he can saddle a bronc."

"Good idea," Reese agreed. "How long will it take for—"

"I can have Doc Forbes back inside of an hour, if he's home. He'll be able to probe for that lead Dusty's packing under his hide."

Reese nodded assent, and stood by his wounded aide while Munger hobbled out on his way to the bunkhouse to send a rider to Bigstrike for a doctor. Choosing a moment when Susan was out in the kitchen for a fresh kettle of hot water, Reese said to his two lieutenants:

"I've got a prize collection of boot marks out in that junk yard. Whoever that bushwhacker was, he and Phil Cheney were confabbing a few minutes before the shooting started."

Hank grinned. "You're dead-set on pinning something on that foreman," he said. "After what's just happened, I hope you're on the right track."

Reese waited until Dusty had been made as comfortable as possible. Then he nodded to Hank and the two of them left the house, heading toward the junk yard. A rider had already left the remuda corral, bound for Bigstrike. Munger's crew were milling in the round-about darkness, excitedly discussing the mysterious shooting.

Reese and Hank made their way to the spot where the wooden door lay behind the mowing machine. Handing Hank his lantern, Reese lifted the door carefully and leaned it against the mower.

"There's the tracks our bushwhacker left," he said. "I—"

Reese broke off in astonishment. The dust under the door was brushed smooth, as if by a gunnysack or broom. There was not a single trace of human footprints in the dirt now.

In the past ten minutes, someone had lifted that door and totally destroyed Reese's all-important evidence!

Hank sensed the field chief's shocked surprise without being sure as to its cause.

"Tracks, Doc? I don't see any," he said in a puzzled voice.

REESE shook his head despairingly, staring off in the direction of the bunkhouse. The ranch yard was alive with men. Any one of them could have come over to this junk yard to smooth off the dirt under the board door.

Finding the guilty man would be virtually impossible.

"Somebody rubbed out the tracks," Reese said. "And I'll bet my bottom dollar it was Phil Cheney— Come on. Let's have a look around this junk yard. Maybe he missed some sign."

Hank handed the lantern to Reese, who conducted a thorough search of the jumble of machinery heaped beside the blacksmith shed. At the rear of the building, where Reese believed the ambusher's horse had been waiting, he came across unmistakable evidence that someone had carefully dragged a sack over the dirt to obliterate any boot marks and hoof tracks that had been made there.

Lying nearby was a discarded oat sack. Picking it up, Reese found the hempen fabric thickly impregnated with dust. This was almost certainly what someone—Cheney, the Association field chief believed, though lacking proof—had used to destroy the killer's tracks.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Flood's Toll*

EXTINGUISHING the lantern, in case they might be targets for another ambush attempt, Reese explained his hunches about the foreman to Hank. The redhead had to admit Doc had a case against Cheney.

"Despite the trust Munger puts in his foreman, I don't trust the man," Reese insisted. "I don't know for certain, but I believe Cheney was talking to someone in the blacksmith shop here when we came out of the bunkhouse tonight and Munger hollered for him."

Hank shook his head in the darkness. "Well, Doc," he admitted, "I got to agree with you. When Cheney acknowledged our introductions as CPA men, his voice sounded pretty loud, remember? Just as if he was letting somebody over in the junk yard know who we were."

"Absolutely," Reese said grimly. "At any rate, we are now known to be alive, not victims of that flood, Hank. And we don't know who we can trust, so—"

Reese broke off as they heard two men approaching down the alleyway between blacksmith shed and the granary. In a moment Phil Cheney and Hal Munger joined them.

"Find the tracks of that shotgun bucko?" Cheney asked.

Reese laughed uneasily. "I did a foolish thing," he said. "I found some tracks in the dust behind that mowing machine out there, along with two fired ten-gauge shotgun shells. But I carelessly dropped an old wooden door over the dirt, hoping to be able to examine the clues by daylight tomorrow."

Hal Munger said gruffly, "A wise precaution, Reese. The wind would have wiped 'em out by mornin'."

"No," Reese said. "Hank and I just had a look. The pressure from the weight of the door flattened the dust. There isn't a single track left."

Phil Cheney said sarcastically, "Not such a wise thing for a detective to do, seems to me like. Destroying your own evidence."

Reese said casually, "None of your men could have walked on that door, could they, Cheney, and pressed it into the dust?"

Cheney said positively, "No. I ordered the boys to stay clear of the junk yard—without telling them you three were lawmen, of course. What wandering they did was over to the horse barn when the boss here said he wanted somebody to ride to town for a doctor."

Reese tossed aside the gunnysack he had been holding.

"Well, let's get back in the house and see how Dusty is making out," he suggested. "It was a narrow escape for all four of us, Munger."

On their way back to the ranchhouse, Hank Ball noticed that Reese did not give old Munger any hint that he was suspicious of the foreman. Cheney had rejoined his men at the bunkhouse.

Munger, however, felt obliged to continue his defense of Phil Cheney's good character.

"Cheney's worked for me a long time, and he's absolutely reliable," Munger said. "At one time, even, I thought he was going to be my son-in-law."

They were crossing the grassy lawn now. Hank Ball said quickly, "Yeah? The ramrod had his eye to marrying Miss Susie, eh? Can't say as I blame him. Your daughter is a charming young lady, Mr. Munger."

Munger laughed as they went up the porch steps, his wooden leg sounding noisily.

"Cheney's been in love with Susie since she wore pigtails," he admitted. "But three-four years ago, young Harvey Lund braced me for a job. And last Christmas, he slipped a diamond on Susie's finger. Much as I liked Phil, I didn't mind her choosing Harvey. He's a good buckaroo. Be a good man to run the Walkin' M after I'm gone. Providing I've got a ranch to leave 'em."

INSIDE the ranchhouse they found Dusty resting more easily. Susan had enlisted the help of some of the crew to carry the

rotund range detective into a spare bedroom, where Reese and Hank found him ensconced between white sheets, a rare luxury for Dusty.

When they were alone in the room, Dusty fired up one of Munger's Cuban perfectos and inhaled with relish.

"Looks like we set our foot into a red-hot case, right at the start, eh, Doc?" he commented, wincing slightly as he moved his buckshot-peppered leg.

"Yeah," grunted Hank, "and Doc's buildin' up a pretty good case of circumstantial evidence against that Cheney hombre. Tell him, Doc."

While working on a mysterious case, Reese always tried to keep his lieutenants abreast of his own deductions. He proceeded now to explain to Dusty his reasons for suspecting the Walking M foreman of complicity in tonight's bushwhack attempt.

"The fact that Cheney had hoped to marry Susan fits into the background, too," Reese wound up. "Cheney may have his heart set on getting hold of the Walking M. Married to Susan, he could have done it the easy way."

Dusty voiced an objection. "But how about all the rustling, drowning of stock, shooting of line riders—and those missing star toters? You think Cheney was back of that?"

Reese shrugged. "It's possible, isn't it? If the Walking M went bankrupt, Cheney might come up with funds to buy the ranch back at sheriff's auction, pretending he was doing it for Susan's sake. I tell you, boys, too many signs point to Cheney to—"

A knock on the door interrupted them. Hal Munger and his daughter entered, accompanied by two strangers. One was obviously the physician from Bigstrike, for he carried a small black satchel and went at once to the patient's bedside, stripping back the covers for a look at Dusty's gunshot wound.

The other stranger, who was linked arm in arm with Susan, was a tall, handsome young cowpuncher who matched the tintype likeness of Harvey Lund, Susan's fiancé.

"This is Harvey," Susan said, introducing her future husband. "He—he recovered Jake's body late this afternoon."

Harvey Lund's eyes were moist as he faced Reese.

"I understand you three were the last to see my father alive," he said huskily. "I am eternally grateful to you for hanging onto that picture Dad gave you."

Reese nodded gravely. "You have our deepest sympathy, Harvey," he said. "I am glad you recovered Mr. Lund's body. I imagine many of the victims of that flood will never be found."

Everybody withdrew from the bedroom, while the medico went about the tedious job of probing in Dusty's leg for buckshot.

Seated in front of the fireplace in the living room, Reese said gently, "What is the concensus of opinion in Bigstrike about why and how the dam was dynamited, Harvey?"

Harvey Lund, his face lined with the fatigue of his long day's patrolling of the Indian River Canyon in search of his father's remains, sighed heavily.

"The dam going out has set Bigstrike on its ear," he admitted. "Bonanza Syndicate is talking about closing down. They doubt if there is enough high-grade ore left to justify rebuilding the dam. And that's the only way the Bonanza can keep its mines from flooding during operations down-canyon."

Hal Mungo said heavily, "That means Bigstrike's day is done then. It'll be a ghost town a year from now, when the miners pull out. I always said cattle would out-last copper in this land."

Harvey grinned bleakly. "At any rate, Dad, you ought to see Bonanza Lake. It's empty. You won't have hordes of nesters pestering the Government to open your leased range for irrigation."

Munger brightened. "True. My worries are over."

Reese said once more, "What's the talk in town about the blast, Harvey? Any theories as to why it happened?"

THE SON of the dead mining superintendent shook his head.

"It's a mystery, Mr. Reese. One thing—Sheriff Geyman is pretty sure the dynamite that opened those flood gates came from the

Syndicate's powder magazine."

"Yes?" Reese, in spite of his own fatigue, was instantly alert and interested. "What makes the sheriff think that?"

Harvey Lund was silent for a long moment, occupied with his own personal tragedy.

"Well," he said, rousing himself from his revery to answer Reese's question, "the Syndicate office has discovered that over two tons of dynamite is short on their inventory. Somebody, working over a long period of time, must have stolen that high explosive, case by case, and planted it in the flood gate."

## THIRD RAIL

**ODDLY enough, it was not the farm or ranch which supported the horse market in the U.S., but the trolley car. Early trollies were horse drawn, and the utility companies were the largest users of horses in the country. The advent of electricity broke the horse market. The first electric trolley rolled at Richmond, Virginia, in 1887, and five years later the price of a good horse had dropped from $25 to $15, while unbroken horses went for as little as $1.25.**

***—Sam Brant***

Reese digested this information at length. Here was something definite to go on—the proved fact that the source of the dynamite had been located.

"Who," he asked, "has access to the powder magazine?"

Harvey Lund grinned without mirth. "Everybody in town is asking that, sir. And the answer is—the keys were in the possession of the super at the Discovery. My father."

Reese emitted a low whistle, disappointment needling him.

From his brief talk with the ill-fated Jake Lund, he had gained a high opinion of the old man's character. Certainly, if Jake Lund had been planning to destroy the mining operations by blasting Bonanza Dam with stolen explosives from his own magazine, he would have timed the disaster in such a way as to save his own life.

"That flood snuffed out the lives of at least two hundred and twelve men on the Syndicate's books alone," Harvey went on. "To say nothing of the independent outfits working further down the river—prospectors, and the like. It's the greatest tragedy of its kind in the history of Arizona."

Susan Munger got to her feet.

"You gentlemen have had a tough day," she murmured, and smiled. "You must be ready for bed. You can use the room next to Dusty's—unless you insist on going out to the bunkhouse with the crew in the guise of new cowhands."

Reese thought that over. As a result of Harvey Lund's report, he was beginning to think that the answer to the mystery behind this war on the Walking M Ranch might be found in Bigstrike. To Reese's keenly analytical mind, the blasting of the dam and the Bonanza Syndicate's great tragedy were but side issues concerned with a plot to drive the Mungers off the Walking M. And somewhere in that baffling puzzle, Reese believed Phil Cheney was a key figure, perhaps the controlling factor of the whole complex mess.

"We'll sleep here, Miss Munger," Reese said. "To keep a closer eye on Dusty. Mr. Munger can explain that to Cheney and the crew."

The physician entered the living room at that moment, snapping shut his medical kitbag.

"I've given the patient a sedative," he said, "so he can sleep. He is in considerable pain, although he won't admit it."

Hank said anxiously, "He—he'll be able to walk, Doc? He isn't permanently stove up?"

Dr. Forbes smiled benevolently.

"He's a prime specimen of manhood. It will take more than the forty-odd buckshot I picked out of his hide to lay him up. But he won't be forking a bronc for a couple of weeks, at least."

Relief showed plainly on the faces of Dusty's *compadres.*

"Thank you," Reese said. "Please make as many calls on the patient as you deem necessary. I will foot the bill."

Dr. Forbes made a deprecatory gesture.

"If Bigstrike turns into a ghost town as everyone thinks it inevitably will," the mining camp medico chuckled, "I will be glad to get paying patients. Don't worry about your friend. The dope I administered tonight will make him groggy tomorrow, but he'll snap out of it after that."

LATER in the evening, after Reese and Hank had retired to the room Susan Munger had readied for their use, they held a short council of war before blowing out the light.

"We were going it blind when that fake Hal Munger introduced himself to us this morning," Doc Reese said contentedly. "We've got a lot of leads to track down now."

"Such as?" Hank prompted.

"Well, leaving Cheney's part in tonight's shotgun episode out of our calculations," he said, "there is the matter of finding out who, besides Jake Lund, had access to the dynamite supply. There is also the business of discovering the man with the badger whiskers who claimed to be Hal Munger."

Hank Ball blew out the lamp and let the tension of this day's gruelling experiences relax from his muscles.

"Which means," the redhead yawned, "that we'll be shifting our scene of operations to Bigstrike *mañana,* eh, instead of workin' here on Walking M?"

But Reese made no answer. He was already asleep.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### *Tracks of a Killer*

REST for the CPA men, however, was almost immediately interrupted. The pealing scream of a woman in mortal terror brought Reese and Hank rearing out of their beds. The scream was repeated, out in the hall, assuring them it was no dream.

"That's Susie!" Hank Ball yelped, as he and the field chief hastily dragged on their levis. "Something's wrong—"

They dashed out into the corridor, almost colliding with Susan Munger. She was wearing a plum-colored robe of quilted satin, and was carrying a lamp.

"It's Dad!" she choked. "I always—go in to kiss him good night—he went to bed only ten minutes ago—"

Taking the lamp from the girl's paralyzed hands, Hank followed Reese to the open doorway of Hal Munger's bedroom. One glimpse at the figure lying in the four-poster bed was enough to tell them that tragedy had struck, that Hal Munger was past their aid.

The old man's skull had been bashed in with some blunt instrument, his blood reddening the pillow. Beside the bed, the night breeze stirred the curtains of a wide-open window opening on the night's sinister blackness.

Reese's first reaction was to blow out the lamp Hank held, in case the old rancher's killer was outside that window.

"Stay with Susan," he ordered Hank, and hurried around the four-poster to reach the window and lean out, ears keening the darkness outdoors.

A soft breeze rustled the locusts which towered around the Walking M yard. If Munger's killer was retreating from the house, the velvet-soft lawn cushioned his footfalls.

Out toward the barns, a light still burned

in the bunkhouse. The collie dogs were quiet, out on the front porch—something which was significant to Reese. If the dogs had caught the killer's scent they had not barked, because the interloper was well-known to them.

Reese pulled in his head and drew down the window blind. Then when Hank had lighted the lamp he stepped over for a closer examination of the old rancher's body.

An octagonal-shaped dent, oozing brain tissue, was punched in the center of the dead man's bald pate. Even as he indentified the death weapon as a large hammer of some sort, Reese's bare foot touched cold metal and he stooped down to see the ten-pound blacksmith's ball peen hammer lying on the floor, its head smeared with crimson.

This was the weapon. That it had come from Munger's own blacksmith shop was evidenced by the Walking M brand which someone had carved into the thick hickory handle.

Gently, Reese pulled a bedsheet over the dead man. The fact that the old man's face was composed, his gnarled hands relaxed on the covers, told that Hal Munger had been asleep when his killer had climbed in through the window and wielded the hammer.

The killing had been done within the past ten minutes, according to what Susan had said. With a start, Reese realized that the girl was now the owner of the Walking M, and that its stormy destiny was now hers. The peril that had stalked her father to his doom might very well be transferred to her.

Reese went out into the hall. Susan was weeping softly in Hank Ball's arms.

"She wants you to fetch Harvey Lund over from the bunkshack," Hank whispered. "Any—clues?"

Reese nodded, hurrying into his bedroom to get his boots and shirt. In the adjoining room Dusty Trail was snoring loudly, the opiates in his blood stream having caused him to sleep through Susan's shrill screams.

Hank had led the bereaved girl into the living room when Reese left the bedroom. He saw a belt—Munger's, most likely—hanging from a chair back and he buckled it on, checking the loads in the Peacemaker .44 cylinder before thrusting it into holster.

LEAVING the house, Reese made his way around to the bedroom wing. Reaching the window of Munger's room, he squatted down and struck a match, shielding it between his hands.

There was a flower bed alongside the foundation. Clearly visible in the soft mulch there were foot prints—made by miner's square-soled, hob-nailed shoes which were similar, if not identical, to the tracks made by the man who had fired the shotgun and wounded Dusty Trail.

Two pair of prints were visible, facing in opposite directions. This was where Munger's slayer had stood to hoist himself through the window, and where he had jumped back to the ground. The lawn made further trailing impossible.

Reese headed grimly toward the bunkhouse, pondering the evidence he had uncovered under that window. If the person who wore those miner's boots had bushwhacked Dusty and killed Munger, then the rider had doubled back to the ranch after making his initial getaway.

Inside the bunkhouse, Reese found Phil Cheney and the two punchers known as Lefty and Pete engaged in a cribbage game. The rest of the crew had hit their blankets for the night.

"Harvey," Reese said to Lund, who was reclining in a bunk nearby, "Miss Munger wishes to see you. Right away."

The CPA man saw the quick scowl of jealousy strike Cheney's handsome features. Cheney would have given a lot to be the man Susan wanted to see tonight.

Reese was waiting outside when Harvey Lund appeared.

"Anything wrong?" Harvey whispered anxiously.

"Plenty. Listen, Harvey. Was Phil Cheney in the bunkhouse continuously during the past—say—twenty-thirty minutes?"

"Yes, he was. Playing crib. Why?"

"Well, Susan's father has been clubbed to death. I just wondered if Hal's foreman had an alibi, is all."

Dusty Trail, thanks to the shot of morphine the doctor had administered to him,

was the only person who slept any that night. Harvey Lund remained with his fiancée in the living room. Before daylight, Susan Munger was busy in the kitchen preparing breakfast—anything to keep her mind off the tragedy which had invaded the very citadel of the Walking M.

At Reese's direction, Harvey Lund went out to the barn in the cold dark between the false and the true dawn and hitched a span of horses to a spring wagon, which he brought around to the rear entrance of the ranchhouse. There, Hank and Reese loaded the blanket-shrouded corpse of Hal Munger into the wagon box. The blood-stained hammer was wrapped in paper and put aboard the wagon as evidence for the coroner in Bigstrike.

The sun broke over the flat rim of High Mesa just as breakfast was ending. Reese, paying a visit to Dusty's bedroom, did not disturb him when he found the roly-poly detective in the depths of a natural sleep.

Returning to the living room where the group had gathered, Reese gave his instructions for the day.

"Harvey, I want you to stay at Susan's side every minute of the day, understand? Don't let anyone in or out of the house. And keep an eye on Dusty. He'll be hungry when he wakes up. Tell him Hank and I have gone to town. Don't let him out of bed."

Young Lund and his fiancée nodded. Both were gaunt-faced from their sleepless night, spent in this lonely room, so filled with remembrances of Hal Munger and what he had meant to them.

"Don't let Cheney or the crew know about Mr. Munger's killing," Reese went on. "Have them go about their daily duties as usual."

A few moments later Hank and Reese were climbing into the wagon and heading toward the mining camp with their gruesome freight. Strapped around Hank's husky midriff was a cartridge belt and holstered Bisley .38 which he had borrowed from Harvey Lund. Not knowing what grim developments they might face in Bigstrike this morning, neither of the CPA men wanted to be unarmed.

THE courthouse, where Sheriff Mel Geyman and the county coroner had their offices, was situated on the near, or north, rim of Indian River Canyon at the entrance to the Iron Bridge. Reese and his partner were able to get Munger's corpse into the morgue without rousing the attention of the mining camp's populace, most of whom thronged the saloons on the south side of the camp.

Sheriff Geyman proved to be a veteran lawman who had worn the star of a deputy in Mesa County since before Bigstrike's copper boom came into being. In those days, the town had been known as Mesa Rim, and had been little more than a trading center for outlying cattle spreads.

After checking the Cattlemen's Protective Association credentials of the range detectives, Geyman became instantly friendly and cooperative.

"Munger's killing isn't a surprise," Geyman said. "I've seen it coming, ever since my predecessor, Sheriff Gates, disappeared while trying to track down rustlers who raided the Walking M. It's a wonder to me Hal wasn't cut down long before now."

Reese dismissed Munger's killing from his thoughts for the time being.

"Yesterday's dam explosion," he said. "Any clues as to who caused that, Sheriff?"

Geyman shook his head. "None. Take a look at the dam—or where the dam was—and you'll see the impossibility of checking the flood gates, Reese."

Reese was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Could you take me to the powder magazine from which the dynamite was stolen, Geyman?"

The sheriff looked startled. "You've found that out already, eh? You work fast, Reese. Quite in line with your reputation. Sure. Come along."

The Bonanza Syndicate's storehouse for explosives used in mining operations proved to be an abandoned prospect hole under the north rimrock, reached by a ledge trail past the smelter. For the first time in months, the Syndicate's reduction mill was not operating this morning. The flood had destroyed all available ore supplies. The mill would probably never reopen.

Reaching the entrance to the powder magazine, Steve Reese saw that it was closed by a massive iron door, locked with a huge bronze padlock of laminated design. The hasps of the lock had been recently sawed in two. In lieu of a new lock, the powder magazine was now guarded by an armed employee of the copper mining firm.

"The original lock hadn't been tampered with," Sheriff Geyman explained, as the guard, on the sheriff's instructions, opened the the iron door for Reese's inspection of the interior. "The officials of the Syndicate ordered the lock removed following the blast yesterday, to check the explosives inventory."

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Impersonator*

HANK and Reese accompanied the sheriff into the rock-walled tunnel. As far back into the dark grotto as they could see, the cavern was filled with cases of dynamite, boxes of blasting caps, coils of fuse, and casks of blasting powder.

"The Syndicate's records show nearly four thousand pounds of blasting materials are missing," Sheriff Geyman said. "There can be little doubt but that whoever blew up the dam used dynamite stolen from this magazine, case by case, over a long period of time."

Reese went back outside, having seen and heard enough to confirm what Harvey Lund had told him at the Walking M last night.

"And the only keys to the magazine were in the possession of Superintendent Jake Lund?" Reese asked the sheriff.

The lawman said emphatically, "That is true. What is more, realizing the danger of the keys falling into unauthorized hands, old man Lund kept them on his person at all times. When young Harvey located his father's drowned body down the canyon yesterday, the keys—including the ones to this powder magazine padlock—were on a chain around his neck."

The three lawmen began trudging back up the steep trail past the smelter. Below them, Indian River foamed over its rapids. The spot where the earth-fill dam had been was now gutted clean by the draining waters of Bonanza Lake. A large crowd had gathered on the Iron Bridge, peering down into the awesome chasm. All work at the mines had been indefinitely suspended.

"Was Jake Lund a trusted employee of the Syndicate?" Reese wanted to know, although the question was a routine one. No miner could rise from the ranks to be super at the Discovery diggings without enjoying the confidence of his superiors.

"Absolutely," Sheriff Geyman said. "If you think Jake had anything to do with the blasting of that dam, Reese, you are on the wrong track."

Reaching the level of the rimrock, Reese and his two companions halted to recover their breath.

[*Turn page*]

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"There is but one obvious conclusion to be drawn, then," the CPA field chief said. "Some criminal was in possession of duplicate keys to the powder supply."

Geyman looked startled. "I hadn't thought of that," he said. "That's entirely possible."

Reese went on, "For such an important lock, it is quite possible that the head office had duplicate keys."

The sheriff, however, had an answer for that.

"The Syndicate boss says no. He says Jake Lund had the only keys."

"In that case, Lund might have had duplicates made at some locksmith's. Does there happen to be a lock and key shop here in Bigstrike?"

A shine of excitement touched the faded surfaces of Geyman's sun-squinted eyes.

"Yes. The Acme Lock Shop, over on Main Street."

Reese started up the path which led to the Iron Bridge. Main Street was on the south side of the river gorge.

"If Jake Lund had any duplicate keys made, then, the Acme is where he would have had that done. The thing to check now is whether the locksmith remembers having ground any duplicate keys for Lund's powder magazine at any time in the past—and if so, whether Lund got all the copies."

Hank Ball and the sheriff had to hustle to keep up with Reese's long strides as they headed over the cantilever span on their way to the south side of camp.

"By the way," Reese said, "who runs the Acme Lockshop? Has he been there long?"

Puffing heavily, the old sheriff answered, "Ever since the first copper deposits were prospected in the canyon, Reese. An old-timer name of Cheney. Gus Cheney."

REESE came to a dead halt, his eyes shining. He reached out to grip Geyman's arm.

"Cheney? Did you say the locksmith's name is *Cheney?*"

Sheriff Geyman looked startled.

"Sure. August Cheney. Used to be a miner before a cave-in ruined one of his kneecaps."

Reese's pulse were pounding madly. For the first time since Colonel Beauvine had assigned him to the Walking M case, the field chief believed an end to the mystery was in sight.

"Is this locksmith," he said, "any relation to the foreman out at the Walking M—Phil Cheney?"

"Sure. Gus is Phil's half-brother. About double Phil's age. Phil didn't cotton to mining, always hankered to be in saddle."

Reese said, "And this Gus Cheney walks with a limp?"

"Yes," Geyman said. "From the mining accident years ago. Took up locksmithing for a trade."

Hank Ball could contain his excitement no longer. "And does this Gus Cheney jasper have a beard—a badger-colored beard?"

The Bigstrike sheriff was getting more puzzled by the minute by the excitement the CPA men put into their innocent-sounding questions.

"Yes, yes, he has! Why?"

Reese gave Geyman's sleeve a jerk. "Come on," he said. "I can't wait to get to the Acme lock shop. I have a hunch Hank and I have met Gus Cheney before."

Leaving the south end of Iron Bridge, the sheriff turned west in the direction of the Miner's & Stockman's Mercantile. Next door to the Mercantile was an unpainted shack with a rusty sheet-iron roof. It bore a sign shaped like a key, with the faded legend:

ACME LOCK SHOP
Keys Made While You Wait
A. L. CHENEY, Proprietor

"Hank, you mosey around to cover the back entrance," Reese said in a low voice. "Sheriff, would you mind covering me from this angle while I go inside for a look at Cheney?"

The sheriff nodded, bafflement still apparent in his scowl. Hank hurried down the alley alongside the key shop. Reese, giving his aide time to deploy himself in the rear, sauntered past the hooked-open screen door.

A miner's frowsy wife was standing before a small counter, watching the keysmith at work grinding a key on a treadle-powered

emery wheel. The walls of the little hole-in-the-wall shop were covered with blank keys dangling from rows of nails.

Reese's hand dropped to the stock of Hal Munger's six-gun as he recognized the badger-whiskered profile of the lock expert. Gus Cheney was the oldster who had impersonated the Walking M boss yesterday! The case was beginning to break now.

"Good morning, Mr. Munger!" Reese said, as the locksmith looked up from his work. "I'm back from my little swim."

Gus Cheney's seamed countenance was as inscrutable as a graven image. Neither surprise nor fear touched his watery eyes.

"Be right with you," he said, unlocking the door key from the vise on his grinding machine. "That'll be two bits, Missus Wiley."

The woman handed over a coin, put the key in her pocket and sauntered out the door. Reese moved up to the counter facing Cheney, aware that the locksmith planned to run a bluff on him.

"Now, what was this about a swim, stranger?" Cheney asked. "And you must have made a mistake. My name isn't Munger."

A scowl of annoyance put its notch between Reese's brows.

"All right, Cheney. Let's say you've got a short memory. Let's say you don't recall a thing about putting me and my two friends aboard your brother's buckboard yesterday and sending us down the canyon ahead of that flood."

An amused grin appeared behind the ambush of brindle whiskers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Reese fished in a chaps pocket and drew out his silver star, indentifying him as the field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. He said crisply, "You are under arrest, Cheney. Come along. We'll do our bluffing in Geyman's office at the jail."

EVEN the sight of Reese's law badge did not seem to make an impression on Cheney. Reese thought, *"He's a cold-nerved bucko. More dangerous than he looks."*

"I beg your pardon?" the locksmith said, swatting emery dust off his denim work apron as he moved back from his counter. "Why should you arrest me? On what charge? Where is your warrant?"

Reese grinned bleakly. "I have no warrant. I don't need one. I've got three witnesses to prove you impersonated Hal Munger yesterday, with the intention of sending those witnesses to their deaths."

The grin widened under Cheney's tobacco-rusted mustache.

"I will go with you to the jail office," he said, "but you can't prove such a trumped-up charge on me. Why should I try to pass myself off as Hal Munger?"

As he finished speaking, Cheney was reaching behind his back to untie the strings of his work apron. Reese's alert eye had already convinced him that the locksmith was not carrying a weapon under that garment.

Now, pulling the neck loop of the apron over his head, Cheney suddenly hurled the greasy rectangle of denim fabric across the counter, its folds momentarily engulfing Reese's head.

The sharp strike of hobnailed boots on the floor behind the counter reached Reese's ears as he whipped off the apron, instinct making him drop to a crouch.

He had a glimpse of the game-legged locksmith leaping for the rear exit of his little shop. In passing the far end of the counter, Cheney had whipped a .41-calibered derringer from a shelf.

The little single-shot pistol exploded deafeningly in Cheney's fist as he hurled himself backward against the door. The .41 ball whizzed through space which a second before had been occupied by Reese's body, its air-whip ruffling his hair as the bullet imbedded itself on the counter top.

Reese's instinctive drop had saved his life. His own gun was in his hand now, but he held his fire. He had no wish to kill Gus Cheney. He likewise knew that Cheney's derringer was now useless to him, its single shot fired.

The sheriff came charging through the open front door as Reese ducked out the back of the shop. Out in the dust of the alley, Reese caught sight of his quarry sprawled face-down in the dust. Hank Ball was kneel-

ing over Cheney, pinning his head against the dirt with one knee.

The next moment the two CPA men were hauling Cheney to his feet. Horror was stamped on the locksmith's dust-rimed face now. Stumbling headlong into the waiting arms of Hank Ball had taken him completely by surprise.

"Handcuff this man, Sheriff," Reese snapped, holstering his own gun. "You heard him try to kill me. Let that be reason enough for the moment. You should have used your shotgun, Cheney."

With obvious reluctance, the Bigstrike lawman took a pair of iron bracelets from his pocket and notched them over Gus Cheney's wrists.

"I don't savvy this," Geyman protested. "What have you got on Cheney, anyhow? He has been a reputable citizen of this camp for years. His character is above reproach."

Reese laughed coldly. "I hate to disillusion you, Sheriff," the CPA man said, "but I intend to prove that Cheney here was the man back of dynamiting the dam yesterday."

BY NOW, Cheney had recovered his composure. He laughed acidly.

"I'll be suing you for false arrest," he snapped. "My taking a shot at you is nothing criminal. I deliberately aimed high. After all, you came charging into my place of business, threatening me without a legal warrant of any kind. I used the derringer in a moment of panic. I wasn't responsible."

Steve Reese was staring down at the imprints of Gus Cheney's hobnailed boots in the dust underfoot.

"Sheriff," he said, "Cheney's boots will match the hobnail pattern of the prints left in the Walking M flower bed by Hal Munger's killer last night. I'll bet my last blue chip on that. Your friend here rode out to Walking M last night for a pow-wow with his brother Phil. Before he returned to town he had fired a gun loaded with buckshot, to cripple my associate Dusty Trail, and he killed a sleeping man with a hammer."

Cheney drew himself up stiffly. "I have an alibi for every moment from the time the dam blew up till I went to bed at eight o'clock last night, Sheriff," he said grimly. "This fool is trying to frame me."

Geyman was sufficiently impressed with Reese's deductions, however, to escort Cheney back across the Iron Bridge and book him on open charges in the county jail.

## CHAPTER X

### *"Head for Texas"*

AT NO TIME did Gus Cheney's resolution show any sign of cracking. He appeared supremely confident of his ability to prove that he had not ridden out to the Walking M at any time in the past month. Even when the county coroner confronted him with the blood-smeared blacksmith's maul, Cheney's expression remained inscrutable.

As for having made any keys for the mine superintendent, Jake Lund, Cheney ridiculed Reese's charge. With Lund dead, the locksmith knew there would be no way of proving that, unless duplicate keys to the Syndicate's powder magazine could be found at his shop. And Reese was not even inclined to waste time on such a fruitless search, knowing that a criminal as clever as Gus Cheney would have hidden or destroyed such evidence.

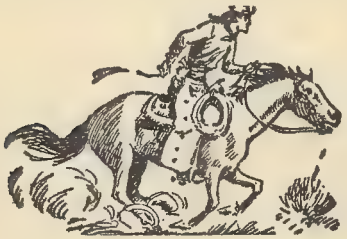
Leaving their prisoner in his cell, the sheriff joined Hank and Dusty out in his office. Reese was carrying with him Cheney's hobnailed boots, evidence which he was confident would be sufficient to put a hangrope around the locksmith's neck.

"We've got a sure-fire case against Cheney, Sheriff," Reese insisted. "Hank, Dusty and I can positively identify Cheney as the man who posed yesterday as Hal Munger. In view of what happened to the dam, Cheney's motive for sending us down Indian River Canyon in the buckboard is indisputable."

Sheriff Geyman was baffled. "But why should Cheney want to blow up the dam?

Why should he want to kill you CPA men? Why should he have gone out to the Walking M to kill Munger? Those are the questions a defense attorney will ask in court. I don't think you have any case as yet, Reese."

Reese smiled patiently. "The dam, the awful loss of life—all that is incidental to Cheney's main plan, Sheriff. Possession of the Walking M, potentially one of the greatest money-making cattle ranches in Arizona, is the thing Cheney and his brother are after."



## A MAN'S JOB

**SPECIALIZATION reared its head even in the old days on the Western ranges. Every Westerner had to know how to ride a horse, but knowing how to ride did not necessarily make a cowboy. A bronc buster dealt entirely with horses and might know nothing or care less about cattle. A Pony Express rider was practically a jockey—he rode racers at high speeds for short distances and knew nothing of the trials and tribulations of a cowboy's life.**

***—Tex Mumford***

Reese picked up Cheney's boots and tied them together with their buckskin laces, hanging them over one shoulder.

"Come on, Hank," he said briskly. "We'll go back to the Walking M and check the nail pattern on the soles of Cheney's brogans with the footprints made last night by Munger's killer. And I think we've got enough evidence against Phil Cheney to place the Walking M foreman under arrest as well. When Phil hears his half-brother has been arrested, I have a hunch he'll crack up and confess. He isn't the man his brother is."

Hank and Reese made their way out of the sheriff's office and were tightening the cinches of their saddles for the return ride to Walking M when Hank suddenly exclaimed:

"Hey, look coming yonder, Doc!"

Reese stared over the cantle rim in the direction of the road leading to the Walking M. Approaching Bigstrike at a tight gallop came two riders, whom they recognized as Susan Munger and Harvey Lund.

"I told them not to leave the ranch!" Reese cried. "I especially told them to stick around and take care of Dusty when he woke up!"

The riders reined up as the two CPA men headed away from the courthouse to wave them down. One look at their strained faces told Reese that Harvey and the girl were bearers of grim tidings.

Reese said angrily, "I told you to stay with Dusty! Don't you realize his life may be in jeopardy out there?"

Susan swung down from stirrups, her blue eyes wide with a haunting fear.

"Mr. Trail has disappeared, Mr. Reese!" she said heavily. "That's why we came to town—to let you know."

Hank Ball laughed. "He woke up and pulled a sneak, I reckon," the redhead said. "Dusty will be showing up in town soon as he can rustle himself a hoss."

REESE, refusing to be alarmed, turned to Harvey Lund, who still sat his saddle.

"How could Dusty have slipped out of the house without your knowing it, Harvey?"

Young Lund hung his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Reese. Susie got a hankering to ride over to the foot of the cliffs and visit her mother's grave. Thought it would comfort her. At that time, Dusty was still sound asleep. We—we were only gone twenty minutes. I couldn't deny Sussie that favor."

Reese made a disgusted comment under his breath. "Well, Dusty must have awakened and decided to find Hank and me," he said. "We're riding back to the ranch anyway."

Something in Harvey's eyes made Reese pause in the act of turning to head for his horse at the sheriff's tie bar.

"Dusty didn't leave the house under his own steam, Mr. Reese. This message was left on his pillow."

As he spoke, Harvey Lund pulled a slip of paper from his hip pocket and leaning from stirrups, handed it to Reese. The paper was a leaf torn from a bunkhouse calendar.

A stab of despair went through both CPA men as they read the crude words printed on the calendar sheet with an indelible pencil:

YOU WON'T SEE YOUR PARTNER ALIVE AGAIN UNLESS YOU HEAD FOR TEXAS ON THE NOON TRAIN, REESE.

Instantly, Reese took out his watch. The time was eleven minutes to twelve.

"This is Phil Cheney's work," Hank Ball snapped. "He must have been watching the house. Saw Harvey and the girl leave to visit Mrs. Munger's grave. All doped up like he was, Dusty probably didn't put up any fight when Cheney kidnaped him."

Hank's reasoning exactly paralleled that of Reese. What mattered now was that this kidnaper's warning message was the genuine article. Somewhere, Dusty Trail was being held hostage to force the CPA to hold off its investigation of the war on the Walking M Ranch. Dusty might already be dead.

"Phil Cheney is somewhere here in town right now, Mr. Reese," Susan Munger broke through the disturbed run of Reese's thoughts. "We saw him riding this way ahead of us a mile or so, saw him cross the Iron Bridge."

Reese carefully folded the kidnaper's message and put it in his wallet. It was useless to ask Susan or Harvey whether they knew who had written the note; the handwriting had been too thoroughly disguised.

"Is there an out-going train leaving Bigstrike at noon?" Reese asked heavily.

"Yes," Susan informed him. "It's the train you arrived on yesterday. It returns to Phoenix today. It won't be back for another week."

Reese's brain had been working at incredible speed during the last few moments. Already, he had his plan of future action mapped out.

"If Cheney came to Bigstrike, it was to spy on us and see whether we boarded that train for Texas," he said. "We will not disappoint him, Hank. We've got exactly nine minutes to get over to the depot and buy our tickets. You can be sure Cheney will be watching us."

Hank Ball's cheeks paled. "But we can't hightail back to Austin and leave Dusty out here, Doc!"

Reese was not listening. He said to the young couple from Walking M, "Both of you have funeral arrangements to make for your fathers. I suggest you remain here in town. With Dusty's life at stake, we've got to carry out the kidnaper's orders. We're hopping that train."

WITHOUT further comment, Reese turned on his heel and headed toward the sheriff's office. Geyman had been standing beside the horses, listening to what the riders from the Walking M had to say.

"Sheriff," Reese said, "we are going to leave that train as soon as it is out of sight of Bigstrike. Will you meet us down the tracks a couple of miles out with a pair of saddle horses, as quickly as possible?"

Geyman nodded. "Glad to," he said. "You know, I didn't think you two would desert your pardner and vamose back to Texas. But Cheney's got to think you have, eh?"

Steve Reese and his redheaded aide saw no trace of Phil Cheney on their way across the Iron Bridge to the railway station. But they were positive that from some shadowy alley mouth or curtained window, the Walking M ramrod's eyes were upon them.

Even this apparent surrender to the kidnap message demands would not guarantee Dusty Trail's safety; both detectives knew that. But they were staking their hopes on the premise that Dusty was still alive, and that they could postpone his death by appearing to leave Bigstrike.

By the time they had purchased tickets as far as Phoenix, the engine bell was clanging and the conductor was standing with his watch in one hand, gripping on the iron grabrail of the rear day coach with the other.

Fully aware that their departure was being witnessed by hostile eyes, Hank and

Reese boarded the same car which had brought them to Bigstrike less than twenty-four hours before. By the time they had found seats the train was moving.

"Assuming Cheney worked Dusty's kidnaping alone," Reese commented as they watched the outskirts of the mining camp glide past the grimy windows, "I have a hunch he has hidden Dusty somewhere on the Walking M. He wouldn't have had time to take him any great distance away during the short interval Susan and Harvey were gone."

Hank Ball nodded gloomily. "Yeah, but for all we know, the whole crew may be in cahoots with Cheney. In that case the ramrod could have lit out for town and the others could have had time to dig a grave and bury Dusty, seeing as how Harvey and Susie pulled out for town so soon."

Reese's eye was on the portly conductor making his way up the coach aisle toward them. It was significant of what Bigstrike's future would be to note that the train was loaded to capacity with miners who were quitting the copper camp on the assumption that the Bonanza Syndicate was through forever.

"I can't blame Harvey and Susan for wanting to bring that message to us as soon as they discovered Dusty was missing from his bedroom," Reese said. "They did right."

It was obvious that the conductor would be too busy punching tickets to reach them at the proper time for halting the train. By now they were a mile away from Bigstrike, the town invisible behind a hogback overlooking the former gulf of Bonanza Lake. Only the Bonanza's smelter stacks were visible to mark the location of the boom town.

Reese gestured to Hank and left his seat. Approaching the florid-faced conductor, Reese reached up to yank the emergency cord. The hoghead in the funnel-stacked locomotive up front responded to the signal instantly, the coach lurching to the bite of brakes.

"Hey, what's the idea, cowboy?" demanded the conductor angrily. "You drunk or something?"

A glance at the law badge in Reese's palm silenced the trainman.

"We're getting off," Reese said. "I would rather the train did not come to a complete stop. As soon as we jump, signal the engineer to highball again."

## CHAPTER XI

### *Phil Cheney Rides*

PUZZLED the conductor followed Reese and Hank to the rear platform of the coach.

Reese considered it unlikely that Phil Cheney would have a spy planted on a hilltop to watch the departing train, but with Dusty's life at stake he wanted to run no unnecessary risks. For that reason, as soon as the train had slowed to a fifteen-mile-an-hour pace, he and Hank Ball leaped to the cinder-carpeted apron of the roadbed and dived into the shelter of a smoketree bosque alongside the right-of-way.

The conductor on the rear platform waved to them and gave the engineer his clearance signal. At once the train began to pick up speed and soon vanished around the V-shaped banks of a cut, leaving behind a lingering stench of hot oil and steam and wood smoke.

"There's the two-mile post," Reese said, indicating a white signal board a few yards away. "We timed it exactly right. If the sheriff is on his toes we shouldn't have to wait long for horses."

Within twenty minutes the anxious lawmen caught sight of Sheriff Geyman approaching from the north, trailing two saddled horses. The Bigstrike lawman had chosen to follow a trail under the rim of the Bonanza Lake gorge, so that his departure from the copper camp would not be noted.

"Good deal," Reese applauded the sheriff's precautionary measure. "I think the sheriff is a man to ride the river with, Hank."

By the time Geyman had reached the

track, the two had moved out of hiding to signal their presence.

"I'd of been here sooner," Geyman reported when the pair were mounting the two geldings, "only I arranged for Coroner Breakspear to pull the flag down the courthouse staff the minute Phil Cheney left town for the Walking M. Figgered you'd want that information without going back to town to spy on the bridge road at closer range."

Reese's grin showed his approval of the sheriff's teamwork.

"An excellent bit of thinking, Geyman," he complimented. "I had had in mind circling the canyon and posting ourselves out on Walking M range where we could keep an eye on any riders heading toward the ranch. This way we'll be spared wondering if Cheney left town as soon as he saw the train pull out."

The sheriff fumbled in one of his *alforja* pouches and drew out an ancient brass-bound telescope.

"Relic of my army days." Geyman grinned. "We can see the tip of the courthouse flagpole from here, with this glass. If Cheney's still in town, we won't have to be in such a rush to get around the canyon."

Reese and Hank reined their horses in alongside Geyman's stirrups, breathless with suspense as the sheriff focused the spyglass on the flagstaff which was invisible to the naked eye from this range.

"Old Glory's still flyin'," Geyman said, passing the telescope to Reese. "Means Cheney hasn't left for the ranch yet. I got a hunch that by now Phil is wondering why his brother ain't at the locksmith shop."

With this assurance that the man they believed to be Dusty Trail's abductor was still in Bigstrike, the three riders left the railroad tracks and veered northeastward toward the far end of what had been Bonanza Lake.

When they had reached the inlet of the drained lake and had forded Indian River some distance upstream from the gorge, they paused to have another look through the telescope at the county courthouse, now plainly visible on the western horizon to the north of Iron Bridge. The Stars and Stripes still floated from the flagstaff.

IN ORDER to reach the Walking M, Phil Cheney would have to cross the Iron Bridge and pass within a stone's throw of the courthouse. There was no chance of his eluding the watchful eye of the county coroner.

Seeking out a dry barranca which snaked across the fertile buffalo-grassed flats of Walking M leased graze, the three riders covered another three miles before leaving their horses out of sight under the cutbanks and climbing to the prairie.

This time, the telescope revealed that the American flag had been lowered from the courthouse pole.

"Cheney's left town!" Geyman said excitedly. "Happened sometime while we were riding up the arroyo, so that rider foggin' along the section line road must be Cheney."

Reese took the glass from the sheriff and focused it on the black speck of a horseman who was heading out the Walking M road at a canter. The telescope had a magnification of forty power, so that Reese had not the slightest difficulty in identifying the lone horseman as the Walking M foreman.

"We'd better hit the trail," he said anxiously, as they hurried back down the arroyo slope to their mounts. "How close will this gulch take us to the Walking M?"

Back in saddle, Geyman said, "Within half a mile. From then on to the ranchhouse we'll be in the open. And even if we took to the prairie from here, Cheney would beat us there."

They spurred to a gallop, although they realized the danger of Phil Cheney's spotting the great ragged plume of alkali dust which their ponies' hoofs sent boiling above the arroyo rims.

But speed was imperative. If Dusty Trail was being kept prisoner somewhere around the ranch, they had little doubt but that Cheney would club his prisoner to death immediately upon returning to the Walking M. Cheney would be a fool to spare his victim's life, merely because Trail's kidnaping had forced the CPA to drop its investigation.

The twistings and turnings of the eroded gulch cut down speed, added to the distance the lawmen had to travel. At length, when

the cutbanks dropped away and they found themselves facing the open range, they had a full panorama of the late Hal Munger's ranch at the base of the towering basaltic cliffs of the Cascabel range.

The road leading to Bigstrike was off to their left. It was empty. Despair shot through Reese as he realized that the foreman had already arrived at the Walking M. He might at this moment be plunging a knife into his prisoner's chest!

It was Hank Ball who spotted Phil Cheney, as they were emerging from the shallow barranca.

"There he goes—toward the mountains!" Hank exclaimed, pointing off to the northeast. "He left the road and by-passed the ranch. You can see his dust trail hangin' in the air."

Reese seized the telescope from the sheriff's hand and trained it on Phil Cheney. The Walking M ramrod was heading toward the mouth of a shadow-blocked canyon which broke the lithic face of the mountain wall, a mile east of the Munger home spread. He was holding his shad-bellied dun stallion to an easy fox-trot.

"Seems to be heading for Skeleton Canyon," the sheriff said, as he watched Cheney swing his horse in the direction of the split in the cliffs.

Reese gathered up his reins. "Any legitimate reason he might have for visiting Skeleton Canyon, Sheriff? Is there a holding corral for Walking M stock in there, or anything?"

Geyman shook his head. "Nothing in there but an old mine prospect. Used to be a shack, years ago. The canyon peters out less'n a quarter-mile from the mouth yonder."

Reese said grimly, "If Dusty Trail is being held prisoner at that mine in Skeleton Canyon, it means Cheney had help to take him there from the ranch. We know Cheney must have left for Bigstrike almost as soon as he got Dusty out of the house."

THEY saw Cheney vanish inside the murky jaws of Skeleton Canyon. At once the three lawmen spurred their gaunted horses into a reaching gallop, a sense of time fast running out on them adding to their urgency.

A ten-minute run brought them to the mouth of the canyon. A pair of fresh wagon tracks led into the defile, along with the marks of hoofs to show where Cheney had just entered.

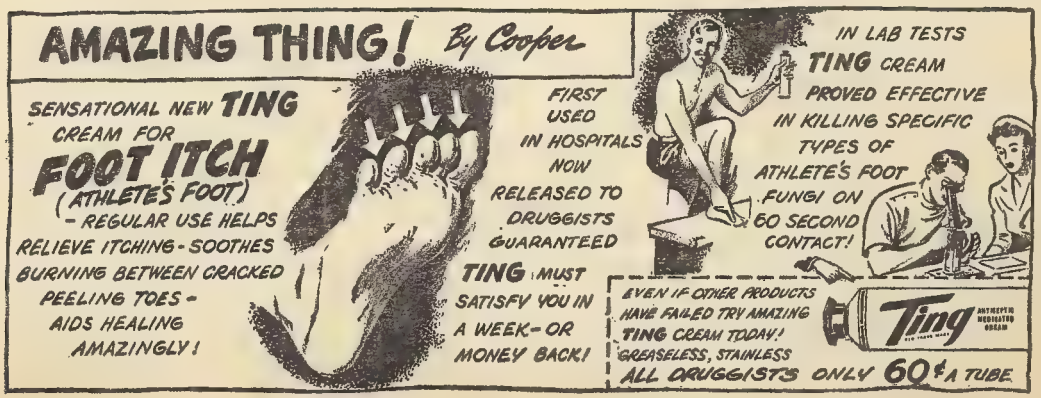
"Cheney's men must have waited until Harvey Lund and Susan left for town," Reese reconstructed events. "Then they loaded Dusty into a buckboard and took him out to this canyon."

The sheriff nodded somberly, busy checking the cartridges in the magazine of his saddle gun.

"Which means we may be outnumbered when we get there. But them wagon tracks give credence to your hunch that Trail has been taken to that old prospect."

Guns palmed, realizing the danger of Cheney having left a lookout on guard at the entrance to Skeleton Canyon, the three lawmen sent their horses into the dense shade of the narrow, twisting gulch.

[*Turn page*]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The dust of Cheney's recent passage ahead of them still hung heavily on the motionless air. The twin ruts of an abandoned mining road followed the rocky pit of the cliff-walled fissure.

Two hundred yards into the canyon, the sheriff held up a warning hand.

"Best go on foot from here," he whispered. "A horseshoe hittin' a rock will sound like a bass drum to anybody up at the dead end of this hole."

Hank and Reese slid from stirrups, hearts hammering their ribs. Unknown odds faced them around the elbow bend of this rocky cleft. In the event of a siege, Cheney would have the advantage of using Dusty Trail as a hostage, as a bargaining lever against them.

Reese stepped into the lead, Colt .45 jutting ahead of him from hip level. Shoulder to shoulder, Sheriff Geyman and Hank Ball paced behind the CPA field chief as they rounded the bend of the canyon and saw a dead end a hundred yards away.

A spring wagon hitched to a two-horse team was at one side of a small, weather-beaten rock cabin. Above and behind the cabin was the black maw of a prospect tunnel, with a sprawling heap of tailings fanning away from it.

At the bottom of that sprawl of rock, two Walking M punchers were busy with shovels, digging a hole in which they now stood knee deep. A hole roughly three feet wide by six feet long. Nearby was Phil Cheney's dun saddler, cropping grass at the rim of a bubbling spring overhung by a weeping willow.

"Dusty's grave," whispered Doc Reese. "Come on. We'll see if we're too late."

5

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## CHAPTER XII

### *Skeleton Canyon Showdown*

ONLY ONE thought was in Dusty Trail's drug-numbed mind at this moment—an overpowering desire to smoke one last stogie before his doom was sealed.

He was seated on an old powder box, at the rear end of a rock-lined tunnel. His left arm was in a sling; the bandages on his thigh made it difficult for him to move his leg.

This was where Phil Cheney had brought him, or rather Phil Cheney's men, who had called each other Pete and Lefty. The whole thing was a disconnected nightmare in Dusty's memory.

He had gone to sleep last night in a bedroom in Hal Munger's Walking M ranchhouse. That much he remembered clearly, as he did the agonizing experience of the Bigstrike medico probing for buckshot in his tissues.

The medico had given him an injection of morphine to ease his pain. And Dusty's next conscious recollection was seeing Harvey Lund and Susan Munger tiptoeing out of his bedroom, sometime this morning.

He had slept then, in spite of the buckshot wounds. And then, groggy from the after-effects of the morphine, he had been roused by three men hauling him out of bed.

A bandanna had been knotted around his mouth, so that he could make no outcry. He recalled Phil Cheney's grating voice giving orders to Lefty and Pete after the two punchers had hauled their prisoner out the bedroom window.

"Harvey and Susan will be back any minute. Keep Trail out of sight in the root cellar until after they light a shuck for town. Then load him in a wagon and get him out to Skeleton Canyon and ride herd on him."

What had transpired next, Dusty could not be sure, for he had been blindfolded when he had been removed from a cellar

that smelled of rotting potatoes and wet burlap. Lefty and Pete, angered over Dusty's weight, had been pretty rough in their handling of him, especially when loading him in the wagon.

A journey of a mile or two in the jouncing vehicle had followed. When the blindfold and the gag had been removed, Dusty found himself in this prospect hole.

"He's too stove up for us to have to hogtie him," Lefty had remarked. "Might as well take it easy, fat boy, until Cheney gets back from town. Whether you live or die depends on what the ramrod finds out in Bigstrike about your pardners and what they're doing."

Dusty was too physically knocked out to attempt to get out of the cavern. Especially with Lefty and Pete out front, busy digging a hole at the foot of the tailing heap. Dusty had no doubt as to what that hole was to be. His grave.

The hours had dragged. In his weakened condition, Dusty Trail lost track of time. The only sound to disturb the dead end of Skeleton Canyon was the burble of a spring—which tormented his thirst beyond endurance—and the endless scrape of shovels on rocky earth.

"I'd give my eye teeth for a nickel seegar," Dusty groaned, shifting his weight on the powder box. "I—"

The prisoner broke off as he heard Phil Cheney's voice amplified by the roundabout cliffs, outside the prospect tunnel:

"That's deep enough to cover his carcass, boys. No use killing yourselves working. We'll drag some tailings over the dirt and nobody'll ever suspect that a grave is under it."

A shadow fell across the four-foot opening of the tunnel. Dusty's baby-blue eyes squinted against the daylight glare as he recognized the burly shape of the Walking M foreman entering his prison.

"Dusty," Phil Cheney said, drawing a Colt as he hunkered down in front of his roly-poly prisoner, "I left a message on your pillow after we drug you out of the ranchhouse. A note warning your two pards to head back to Texas if they wanted to see you again."

DUSTY grunted. He felt too utterly fagged out even to entertain the idea of picking up a rock to defend himself with.

"It worked," Cheney went on grimly. "Reese and the redhead hopped the train at noon. By now they're crossing the desert on their way to Phoenix."

Dusty attempted a grin. "So they're pullin' off the Walking M case, huh? Well, it's nice to know they ransomed me."

Cheney's reptilian eyes flashed. "Feel like walking?"

Dusty nodded. "Long as I know I'm walkin' out to freedom, Cheney, I reckon I can locomote."

Cheney stood up, his body stooped under the dank ceiling of the grotto.

"*Bueno.* Come on."

Cheney, gun holding its point-blank drop on Dusty's beefy shape, stood aside as the CPA man hobbled painfully out of the prospect hole into the waning daylight in the canyon. His abductors had brought along his pants and shirt but not his boots, and the sharp rubble cut his bare feet painfully.

Down at the foot of the tailing pile, Lefty and Pete were leaning on their shovels alongside the shallow open grave. The grins on their predatory faces belied the promise of release which Cheney had given Dusty a moment ago.

The Walking M foreman was stalking at Dusty's back as the doomed CPA man picked his way toward the yawning hole. When he had reached it, Dusty turned to face his captor.

"You aim to gut-shoot me and bury me alive," he said grimly. "But let me tell you something, Mr. Cheney. You made a big mistake when you let Doc Reese and Hank Ball leave this country alive. They'll be back."

Cheney's thumb eared his six-gun hammer to full cock.

"You're the fifth star-totin' son we've buried, Trail," the Walking M foreman said. "We'll have two more graves waiting for your *compadres* when they show up—if they do."

Dusty braced himself for the shock of lead he knew was coming any instant. He wanted to fling himself at Cheney, to die fighting for

his life, but his buckshot-riddled leg made even that desperate movement impossible. He knew he could not trust his weight on the wounded member.

The crash of a gunshot filled Skeleton Canyon with reverberating thunder at that instant. But flame had not spat from Phil Cheney's leveled weapon. The gunshot had come from the direction of the prospector's cabin a few yards away.

Dusty Trail flung himself belly-down in his own grave as Phil Cheney whipped around to face the miner's shack. Lefty and Pete had also dropped, hands plummeting to gun-butts.

Emerging from around the corner of the rock cabin came the tall, crouched shape of Steve Reese. And through the tail of his eye the bayed foreman of the Walking M saw Sheriff Mel Geyman and Hank Ball emerge from the willows behind the spring. They had invaded Skeleton Canyon by keeping to the brush at the base of the cliffs, their approach unseen by any of the killers.

"Lie low, Dusty!" Reese shouted. "Cheney, drop your gun. We've got your half-brother jailed for blasting the dam and killing Hal Munger last night. Your jig is up!"

With a berserk oath, Phil Cheney whipped his gun around to Reese, the Colt spewing flame.

Doc Reese heard Cheney's slugs ricochet off the cabin wall at his back. It was kill or be killed, now. With cold precision Reese drove three fast shots at the Walking M ramrod.

Peering up from the hole that was to have been his grave, Dusty Trail saw puffs of dust jump from Phil Cheney's spotted leather vest as Reese's slugs caught him in the chest.

Slowly, Cheney's legs gave way. He toppled backward on the rubble, smoke fuming from the bore of his Colt.

HANK and the sheriff were coming in fast from the direction of the spring, guns trained on Cheney's two men standing beside the grave. But Lefty and Pete were in no mood to fight when they were caught in a cross-fire. Their guns remained in leather as they raised their arms.

"Count me out of this," Lefty mumbled, as Dusty Trail pulled himself painfully out of the grave at their feet and took charge of their guns. "Cheney and his brother run this show. Me and Pete don't count. We'll turn state's evidence."

After Reese had made certain that his roly-poly aide had suffered no mistreatment at the hands of his kidnapers, he helped Dusty over to the spring to get a cool drink, more thankful than he could express at finding him alive. Then Reese turned to the two Walking M traitors, whom Geyman had shackled wrist to wrist with the same handcuffs he had removed from the locksmith's wrists earlier today.

"Any more of your stripe in Munger's crew?" the CPA field chief demanded.

Pete shook his head. "No. Cheney imported us. We were on the dodge. I reckon you won't have any trouble locating our records, Sheriff."

Reese stared down at Phil Cheney's limp corpse.

"Phil and his half-brother wanted the Walking M pretty bad," he said musingly. "In a way I'm sorry Munger called in the CPA. Otherwise Gus Cheney wouldn't have felt obliged to dynamite a dam in an attempt to keep us off the case. A lot of innocent lives were lost as a result of that."

Lefty's shoulders stirred. "Gus Cheney would have blasted the dam anyhow," he said. "He spent months totin' dynamite down into the flood gates. The Cheneys knew Bonanza Lake had to go before Munger's lease expired, else the Government would have opened High Mesa to sodbusters."

Reese nodded thoughtfully. Lefty's testimony only confirmed what he had already figured out in his own mind.

"Where Phil didn't hold up his end of the deal with his brother," Lefty went on, "was not talkin' Miss Susan into marryin' him. Then he would of owned the walking M without their having to put old Hal out of the way last night. Phil had his alibi for that all right, though, because when old Gus bashed in Hal's head Phil was playin' crib in the bunkhouse with us. Phil was out in

the blacksmith shop talkin' over dynamitin' Bonanza Dam with his half-brother last night when you three CPA jaspers showed up with Hal, after Gus thought you were drowned. That was why Gus opened up with that shotgun."

Reese turned to the sheriff. Darkness was closing in fast, here in the sinister recesses of Skeleton Canyon.

"We might as well save our friend the coroner a hot dusty trip out here tomorrow," the field chief suggested. "As long as we have a wagon available, we might as well tote Phil Cheney's body to the morgue."

Lefty and Pete had the job of lugging their accomplice's limp body to the waiting wagon. As Hank and Reese were helping the wounded Dusty in, Lefty commented drily, "Phil Cheney was only half of the deal, remember. It was his old brother who put the idea into his head of grabbin' the ranch."

THE ONLY lights visible in the Bigstrike courthouse upon their return were those in the morgue and in Sheriff Geyman's office.

After Geyman had departed with his two prisoners to the cell block, Reese and Hank toted the Walking M foreman's corpse into the grisly morgue.

Three bodies were stretched out on the coroner's slab, two of them being innocent victims of the Walking M range war—Hal Munger and Jake Lund. The third gruesome shape was covered with a sheet.

"Couple of brothers came to the same end at the same time," the coroner commented, as he recognized the dead man the CPA officers had brought in. "That third one yonder is Gus Cheney. He knew the jig was up, I guess. When the jailer went into the bullpen with Gus' supper this evening, he found the old man had cheated justice."

"Suicide?" Reese asked dully.

"Yeah," Coroner Breakspear said. "Hung himself with a rope made from a blanket, tied to the bars of his cell window. I reckon it saves Mesa County the cost of a trial."

Reese was too spent to feel either elation or remorse at August Cheney's self-destruction. He turned away from the sheeted corpse of the Bigstrike locksmith and said to Hank, "Hike over to the telegraph office, will you, Hank? Colonel Beauvine will want to know the case is wrapped up."

Hank chuckled. "Reckon the Colonel will be surprised, after writin' us off as dead ones, practically. We didn't do so bad, Chief, solvin' this case in less than two days."

The coroner said awkwardly, "Miss Munger and Harvey Lund are over at Jake Lund's home on Copper Avenue, Mr. Reese. I reckon they'd like to hear the news, too."

Reese and Hank made their way out of the eerie morgue. The air was scented with sage tonight, now that the fuming furnaces of the reduction mill were cold.

"Doc," Hank suggested, "how about gettin' that couple to set up their weddin' date for our benefit?"

Reese grinned. "Might be a good idea," he said. "Susie and Harvey will be running the Walking M's affairs from here on. I'm glad they've got a peaceful range to settle down on. We'll sort of consider that our wedding present to them." • • •


## DODGE CITY WAS A ROUGH, TOUGH TOWN!

**Not only fools and their money were soon parted there, but even smart hombres, paid off in gold for their trail herds, were victims of a sharp-operating crook. For a rousing yarn built around those hectic days, read how Steve Reese tangled with the—**

# RIDERS OF DOUBLECROSS RANGE

***in the smashing novel of that name***

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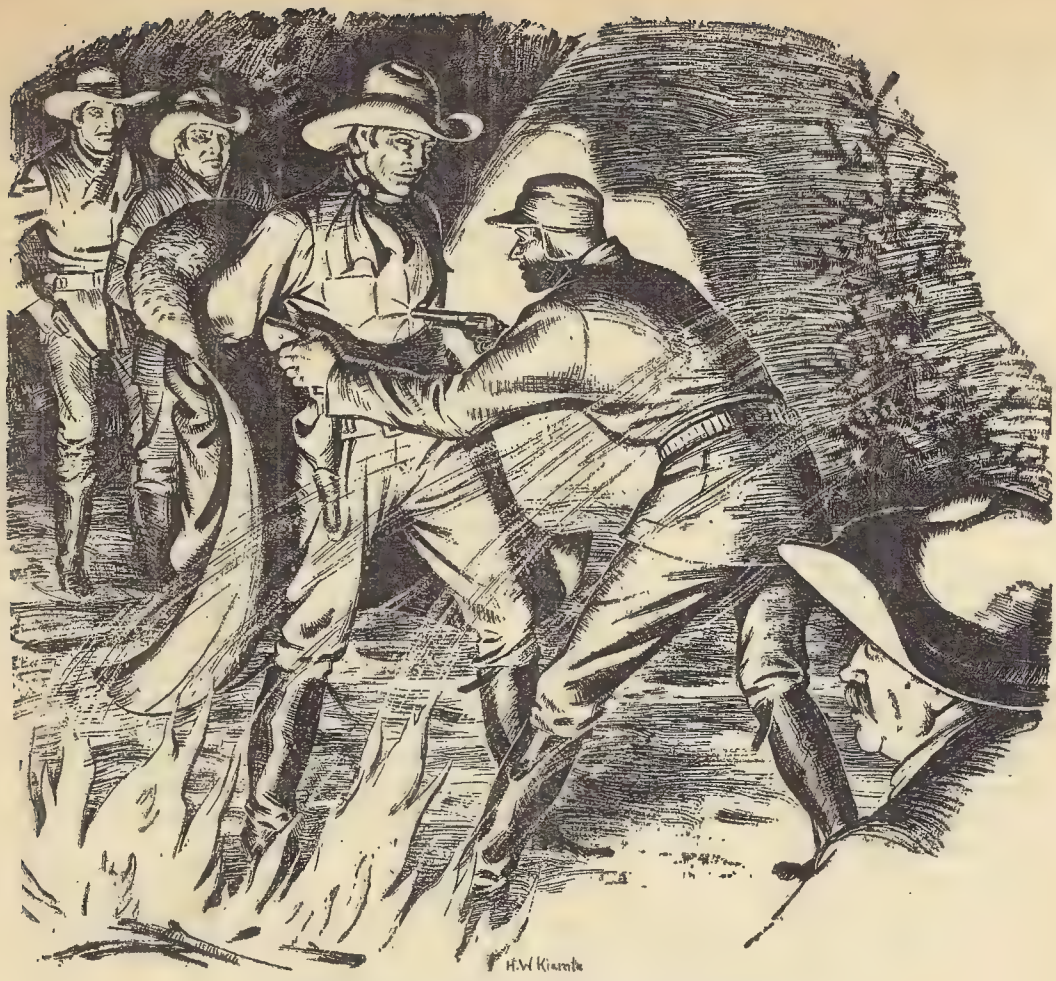


*"Hand it over here, kid," Lawson ordered*

# OWLHOOT TURNABOUT

## By BEN B. SAMPSELLE

SHERIFF Trask was talking.

"Doc, you're an old fool," he was saying. "You're the biggest-hearted one that ever lived, I reckon, but you're still a fool."

Tom Trask, sheriff of Logan County, followed Yates Belden, MD. to the door of his office. Doc didn't say a word, but at the door he turned and smiled.

Doc's smile was something from within rather than a play of facial muscles. It was a brightness that shone like a friendly light in a window to a tired traveler on a lonely road. It glowed for the mother about to give

**Doc Belden Faces the Merciless Guns of the Lawless**

birth to her first-born, and it shone for the man or woman who was putting up a desperate battle against Old Man Death.

With his hand on the bar of the door, Doc said, "What have I got to lose, Tom?"

"Your life, maybe," Trask replied, lips compressed. "On a no-good rascal."

Doc's smile still held. "I've lived a pretty full life. All of us have to go some time. How and when is written in the Book."

Trask watched him go, knowing that no man in this winter-bleak Colorado country had gathered so much esteem and gratitude. A person could see and feel it in the way men and women looked at the old doctor's longish weathered face and tall, gaunt frame. Trask's lips twisted wryly as he remembered the errand that had brought Belden to his office.

Doc Belden stepped out of the sheriff's office into the bitter cold wind that came booming down off the high peaks of the Owlhorn Mountains. He thrust his chin deeply into the collar of his sheepskin-lined overcoat against the stinging pellets of wind-driven snow.

The storm lulled an instant and the swirling white curtain parted as Doc let his glance run along the main street of Three Rivers, past Cluney's Saloon, Jonathan Cooper's bank, where the robbery had occurred last night, the Silver Dollar Restaurant, and stopped on the clapboard front of John Lock's general store.

INSIDE Lock's store it was warm, pleasantly warm, pleasantly odorous with the smell of new leather, fresh ground coffee, dried apples, and the sharp, acrid scent of the dyes in the bolts of calico on the shelves.

"I figured you'd be along pretty soon, Doc," Bill Barth, the liveryman drawled, his round face screwed up in a grin. He nodded at John Lock, the storekeeper. "I was tellin' John, I bet you'd be comin' here, lookin' for revenge. I got the chessboard all set up."

Doc moved up to the pot-bellied stove and held out his hands toward the cherry red of the glowing bowl, his shaggy eyebrows drawn together thoughtfully. His mind was on a larger chessboard, where the "pieces" were men and women who played the same roles as their inanimate counterparts; kings and queens, in a small way, and knights and pawns in an even smaller way, moved by chance winds and circumstance.

"Dust old Nicodemus off your chair, Doc," Barth said, "while I roll out a nail keg to set the board on."

Doc shucked off his overcoat and fur cap and smoothed the tuft of gray hair on his balding head. He lifted the big tiger-striped cat from the chair and set him down on the floor. He delayed an instant to stroke the cat's arched back.

"Come on, Doc. That old mouser don't have to worry none about nothin', whether the blow keeps up or Cooper's bank gets robbed again. You hear anything about the bandits as you come along?"

"Stopped at Tom's office," Doc said, as he sat down. "Tom and his deputies were out for a spell this morning. They didn't catch any of Buck Lawson's bunch."

Barth wheeled the nail keg into place and set the chessboard on it. "Buck and his gang sure picked the right time. I bet they lit out for the Owlhorns. You couldn't track an elephant in this blizzard."

The chess game had limped along by fits and starts for a half-hour when the door flung open and an icy blast of snow-laden air swept in. Barth, who had his back to the door, yelled, "Shut the door! John Lock ain't got no contract to warm up all of Logan County."

"It's the sheriff," Doc said. "Empty-handed."

Tom Trask, a lanky, spare man, came toward the stove, rubbing his ears, followed by two deputies.

"Sheriff," Barth said, "Some of the boys are figurin' maybe Buck Lawson and his gang didn't get out of town with the two bags of gold Cooper said they snatched from the bank vault. I'd like to hear the straight of it. I slept right through the whole thing."

Trask wiped the ice from his mustache, and said, "Jake Dober, the new bartender at Cluney's was goin' home about midnight and noticed a flash of light in the bank. He peeped in and saw three men. He ran down to my place. We went back by the jail and

got Ed, here. Buck and his men were coming out of the bank as we left the jail, that is, we reckon they were because we heard a door bang shut in that direction. We fanned out, shooting at shadows, and they scattered like a bunch of quail. They was sharp; they didn't leave their horses bunched. I sort of figured, too, they'd ditched the heavy bags somewhere, but we looked in every stable and woodshed in Three Rivers last night."

The door swung open again, letting in a gust of snow. Doc called, "Hurry! Shut the door, Luke."

LUKE RAMEY, a strapping big boy of seventeen, but seemingly older, kicked the door shut and strode toward the stove. His dark eyes stared out sullenly from between the ear flaps of his battered cap as his down-at-the-heel boots beat noisily on the board floor. He stopped in front of Lock. "I want a twist of chewin' tobacco."

"Sure," Lock said, "if you've got the money."

"Don't worry," the boy said. "I got the money.

Luke took the tobacco, then came nearer the stove and held out his hands. Doc glanced at him, as if he saw none of the patches on the boy's butternut jeans and the frayed elbows of his hand-me-down jacket.

"Pretty soon, Luke," Doc said, "you'll have to let me know if you're going to take Sloan's place as my hostler. Sloan's going east next week to live with a sister."

The boy's round face crimped in a scowl, then smoothed out. "I'll let you know, likely today."

The doctor looked at his big silver watch and got up from his chair. "Jiminy crickets. I've got to be stirring. Jessie will be waiting dinner."

"You comin' back after dinner for another trimmin', Doc?" Barth challenged.

Doc shook his head. "Wish I could, Bill, but I've got to go out to see Ezra Huffman." From the corner of his eye he watched Luke Ramey.

"Well, I'll be durned!" Barth grumbled. "Never seen it fail. Let a foul piece of weather hit the valley, old Ezra starts hollerin' for Doc."

Doc smiled. "A dose of calomel and a half-hour talk will make a new man out of Ezra."

Luke Ramey stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him. Bill Barth nodded at his back. "Sheriff, I'll bet my hat you'll be throwin' that young hellion in the bucket before the year's done."

"Maybe even sooner," Trask said. "He takes after his old man, who wasn't worth any more to his family when alive than he is now out in the cemetery. His ma was a fine woman. His sister, Martha, down at the Silver Dollar, is a fine girl, but Luke's just naturally ornery."

Doc Belden shook his head. "The boy has a lot of his mother's ways and qualities. If she had lived—"

Barth snorted. "By gum, they must be buried down to China. I ain't never seen any of them."

"Maybe you haven't looked very deep, Bill," Doc said mildly. "Luke's had to take the down-the-nose stare of Three River folks for the cussedness of his pa. That kind of treatment is likely to freeze a sheet of ice over the good in any man. If Luke's handled right, I feel pretty sure the best in him will come to the top."

"I hope you're right, Doc," Trask said, helping Belden into his overcoat. "I'm hopin' to be a member of the family." He looked at the doctor through narrow eyes. "I don't know that I ought to let you take a chance on Luke."

"You mean the hostler's job?" Doc laughed good-humoredly. "I'm betting the boy will prove himself."

The men at the stove watched the doctor go out, and Barth said, "If I had as many uncollected bills as Doc has, I'd go crazy. If people routed me out of bed at all hours—in all kinds of weather like they do him—I'd be a madman in a week." He nodded a little. "Still, I'd bet my best horse, he's the most contented man in the Territory."

SEVERAL hours later, Doc turned to wave at the slender, gray-haired woman standing at the window. With three deft strokes of a finger, Jessie drew a heart pierced by an arrow on the frosty pane. Doc

smiled, waved again, and stepped into the sleigh.

A quarter-mile beyond the straggly edge of Three Rivers, the storm lulled for a moment and the dancing curtain lifted to reveal a man trudging along in the knee-deep snow. The man glanced over his shoulder, then wheeled about. A shotgun rested in the crook of his arm.

"Well, it's Luke!" Doc said, pulling the big-boned sorrel to a halt. "Looking for rabbits?"

"Deer," Luke shouted. "This kind of weather sends them down out of the mountains lookin' for feed. Maybe I could ride a piece with you?"

"Sure." Doc pulled the robes aside. "Mind the lantern I got on the floor to keep my legs and feet warm."

The boy got in and wedged the butt of the shotgun between his body and the cutter's edge, then drew the robes high up against his chest.

"You ought to have a rifle for deer," Doc said, as he flapped the lines over old Freddy's back.

"Sure," Luke growled. "I know it. There's a heap of things I ought to have. Did anybody ever give any of them to me?" His teeth chattered noisily.

"Don't wait for people to give you something, son," Doc said. "You'll die a poor man if you do."

"I've quit waitin'. I'll take it from here on."

"You'll die poor that way, too—and likely young. A man never holds what he just ups and takes. I'm not thinking about dollars only," Doc explained. "I mean you'll die poor of friends, contentment, and happiness."

The boy made no comment to this, and they rode on with the whine of the snow-laden wind in their ears.

"Seems like we ought to be near to the turn-off to Ezra's place," Doc said, and pulled Freddy to a halt.

"It's a jump further on," Luke said, his voice suddenly tight. "But never mind it." He shoved a hard object against Doc's ribs beneath the robes. "Start the old sorrel and keep him steppin' straight on."

Doc jerked his head around. A pair of gray eyes, steely-hard stared at him sullenly. The boy's mouth was now only a thin purple slit in his face, set with an angled savageness. Doc let his glance drop to the snub-nosed gun pressed against his side.

"If we pass anybody," Luke growled, "say your 'Howdy', and keep movin'. Your bottom's settin' over a couple of bags of Cooper's gold."

Doc blinked. "You must be mistaken, Luke. How could I be sitting on a couple bags of gold? Anyhow, turn that gun around, boy—"

"Never mind the boy stuff, Doc. Call me Luke. I slipped the bags under the seat before daylight."

"You helped rob the bank?"

"The next thing to it," the boy boasted. "I'll be a partner with Buck Lawson on his next sashay."

Doc let Freddy pick his way along for a time, then said, "Buck Lawson has no partner. You'll be a hired hand."

"What's the difference? I'll be gettin' pay—gold like under the seat—plenty of it, plenty of it."

DOC wiped the snow from his face, and said, "The hired hands frequently get paid off in lead, too. Two of Lawson's bunch got paid in lead over at Big Spring. How did you get to know Lawson?"

The boy fished a piece of tobacco from a pocket with his left hand. When he had the quid in his cheek, he said boastfully, "Easy. I ain't so dumb. A tall, lanky puncher hung around the livery stable for a spell about two weeks ago. I spotted him right off. We done some talking, and he told me Buck said it was all right if I wanted to join up."

"I was the lookout," Luke continued. "They sneaked down by Jake Buzzy's and threw the bags over the fence. They was too heavy to carry and run, too. Buck told me to get them later and pack them under the seat of your sleigh. He knowed you'd be goin' toward the mountains pretty soon." The sullen lines on the boy's face smoothed out and he chuckled dryly. "You sure made it easy for me, said right out in the store where you was going and when."

Doc drove on. There was nothing else he could do with the gun pushed against his ribs. On the high swells of ground the wind came at them from all sides, and there was no way they could turn to shelter their faces from the icy pellets. Occasionally the sorrel stopped against the white blinding wall, his tail whipped out straight behind him, and waited uncertainly until Doc urged him on again.

In a narrow swale behind a motte of alders, Doc halted the sleigh. He said, "We'll have to let old Freddy blow a spell." He faced the boy squarely. "I guess I had better tell you now, Luke, there's no gold under the seat."

The boy stiffened. "You old reprobate. I'll plug you right here." Suddenly, he relaxed. "Damn if you didn't nearly have me fooled. I got to do better than that. Lewt, that's the feller who hung around the livery stable, said Buck didn't want anybody but cool jiggers riding with him."

"Did you ever hear of me lying to anyone, Luke?"

Luke froze again, eyes narrowed, but relaxed quickly. "Get old Freddy going," he warned, nudging Doc with the pistol. "You're looking for a chance to pull something slick. I'm dry behind the ears."

The trail now pitched steadily upward and Doc knew they had reached the foothills of the Owlhorns. The white pounding wall thinned and the wind tore at them with less violence. They crossed a frozen creek and the trail rose up through a notch and wound among the broken ridges. Snow lay sheeted under the trees, and there were long stretches where the wind had whipped it clean and piled it into deep drifts.

"Turn in there," Luke ordered, as he pointed to a lateral canyon, its near side a sheer wall of rock indented by a wide depression which ran almost to the rimrock. Doc halted old Freddy close to the wall. The horse's sides were heaving; his breath sent twin plumes of vapor into the frigid air.

"Get out and start gathering sticks for a fire," Luke ordered and jerked a thumb at the snow-bare stretch of ground. "Step lively, and remember I'll be watching you."

Stiffly, Doc climbed out of the cutter on his side, Luke on the other. Doc said, "You'd better have a look under the seat, Luke, before you make any more plans."

The boy laughed harshly. "You tried that a couple of times. I didn't bite on it. I ain't going to bite now."

Luke watched the doctor with a wary cunning while he built a fire, the shotgun and pistol at his feet. When the fire was going, he leaned the shotgun against the wall of rock and kept the pistol in his hand.

A THIN darkness had settled in the canyon and was creeping up the far slope where giant firs and spruce were limned against the snow-blanketed ground. Their ice-crusted branches sparkled like diamonds where they caught the reflection of the fire. They reminded Doc of Christmas trees, already trimmed. He wished Jessie could see them. Jessie! She wouldn't start worrying about him until suppertime— He felt a chill run along his spine.

Luke tossed another piece of wood on the fire, and said, "Buck'll be able to see the blaze, and come a-runnin'."

Doc glanced up at the rim of the canyon, then back to the fire. "A posse might be out and see the blaze."

The boy's lips twisted derisively. "No posse's coming out on a night like this. Besides, this draw is broadside to the valley. That's the reason I picked it. But Buck'll be able to see it though from the piece of cave where he's holed up with the others."

Hunkered at the fire to warm his hands, Doc glanced up at the boy. "You're pretty sharp, Luke. It's a pity you're putting your mind to something like this."

A noise from the opposite slope caused both men to jerk their heads in that direction. "Hey, Buck!" Luke called. There was no answer. Then the boy laughed. "Just a nosey deer. Git!" he shouted and waved an arm.

"Your ma was a good woman, Luke," Doc said, hoping Lawson would be delayed. He'd have to have more time to probe for a soft spot in Luke's armor, and he couldn't push against the boy's caginess too fast.

"Sure she was, and the old man wore her out."

"You've got a good sister. Martha's the best that any brother could ask for. She puts in long hours at the Silver Dollar to keep a roof over the heads of you and Mary and Ruth. Don't you want to give her a hand?"

"Sure. I'm goin' to give her a hand, a real one. She can quit the Silver Dollar. I'll be sending her—"

"Did you talk to Martha about it?" Doc asked.

"No! I ain't talked none to her about it."

"I was sure you hadn't," Doc said, standing up to ease the cramp in his knees. "You weren't thinking much about Martha. You know she wouldn't touch this kind of money. You can have the job—"

"Thirty dollars a month?" Luke jeered. "From now on it's the big money and the free life for me."

"It won't be big money, Luke, and it won't be a free life," Doc said, turning his back to the fire. "No bandit ever died rich. Free life for a robber means just one thing—being out of jail." He turned back to face the boy. "Let's get out of here before Lawson sees your fire."

The boy laughed cynically. "We're staying right here. Your sermons are like water on a goose's back to me, Doc." He looked at the old doctor quizzically. "What's so fine about your job; getting up in the middle of the night in all kinds of weather— What do you get out of it?"

"A lot of satisfaction, Luke. The feeling a man knows when he's done a good job, the best he can—"

Luke snorted and threw a handful of wood on the fire. "You'll drag on till you drop—and who'll give a damn about your going?"

DOC spread his fingers toward the fire. "A heap of people feel pretty kindly toward me, I guess, just like I feel toward them. You have to give to get anything, Luke."

"I'm not buying any of your salve, Doc," Luke said. "You stick to your small circle, I'll—"

"Hey, Luke!" a voice came off the ridge.

"It's me," Luke answered, his tone starting gruffly and ending on a high thin note. "I got the gold and I got the old man covered. Come on in."

Three men walked stiff-legged into the bright circle of light, each holding a gun alertly in front of him. They hurried up to the fire and held out their hands to its warmth, while their glances flicked about warily.

Swiftly, Doc studied the faces of the bandits and he felt a chill between his shoulder blades. The center one was undoubtedly Buck Lawson, a medium tall, hawk-faced man, with a pair of hard, raking eyes, his mouth shaped with a leering cruelty. On Lawson's left was the lanky bandit who had hung around the livery stable. The third man was short and barrel-chested, his face scarred and hard-bitten. Lawson's companions wore short-length overcoats, but Lawson himself had none, and his teeth were chattering.

"You got the gold, kid?" Lawson asked.

"Sure thing," Luke said, swaggering. "The stuff's right in the cutter."

Lawson's glance settled on the doctor. "Get off that coat, old man," he ordered, his voice gritty. "I can put it to good use, and there ain't no sense in ruining it with a couple of bullet holes."

Doc's stomach balled into a tight, cold knot. He recalled what Trask had said about him being a fool. It certainly looked like he had been foolish to attempt—

"He'll freeze riding back to town," Luke said.

"He ain't goin' back to town," Buck said flatly. "Not settin' up, he ain't. Pickin's have been mighty slim for us lately, kid. Shuck the coat, old rooster."

Sweat broke over Doc's body. He saw Luke blink, then laugh. Slowly, Doc unbuttoned the coat and got out of it unhurriedly as he took two backward steps toward the wall.

"Hand it over here, kid," Lawson ordered. He put away his gun and hefted the coat. "It's a little long—"

Lawson had thrust both his arms into the sleeves and had the coat halfway on when Luke sprang. He snatched the weapon from Lawson's holster, while he jabbed his own pistol against the bandit's stomach. He

stepped swiftly to the side. The maneuver put Lawson between himself and the other bandits. He trained Lawson's gun on them.

"Grab the shotgun, Doc!" Luke shouted.

Lawson stood there an instant, with all the evil in his vicious life mirrored in his face. Then, like a wounded cougar he leaped straight against Luke's gun.

Doc heard the roar and saw Lawson stop—go back a step. He came on again and Luke's pistol spat out another tongue of fire. Lawson dropped suddenly to the ground, while the reports beat against the wall and rocketed up and down the canyon. Doc had swung the shotgun on Lawson's partners. He had kept the weapon in mind when he took the two backward steps toward the wall of rock.

Doc's voice was mild but had a dangerous edge when he ordered, "Toss your guns to the side, then get up there with your faces against the rock, your hands on your head. Watch them," he told Luke, "while I see if anything can be done for Lawson."

Presently, Doc stood up and shook his head. "He's past my help. There's rope and thongs in the sleigh we can use to tie the other two. I'll get them."

THE wind had lulled and the moon rode up the long slant of the sky bright and cold as Doc guided old Freddy out of the foothills of the Owlhorns. The bandits trudged alongside the horse, the rope which

linked them together tied to the shafts of the sleigh.

"I didn't want to kill Lawson," Luke fretted.

"Of course you didn't, son," Doc said, laying his hand on the boy's knee, "but it was your life or his. Think no more about it. What made you change your mind?"

"You heard Lawson say pickings had been slim," the boy said gruffly. "Besides, I don't like anybody calling me *kid.*"

Doc knew that wasn't the answer—not the full one.

He probed deeper. "What's the rest of it, son?"

"I got to thinking about Martha and the young 'uns. I knowed as well as you, Martha wouldn't take any stolen money—so what would I be working for? I was all primed for stealing, but not for killing, not someone I knowed all my life." He shrugged. "Now, I reckon I got to take my medicine."

"Maybe I can take some of the bitterness out of it, if you're of a mind to listen to Martha," Doc said. "I'm the only one who knows the whole story. Your shooting Lawson will help a heap, too."

Luke flicked his glance to the doctor, to study his face in the dim light. "You can do it, if anybody can. Men listen to you, but Tom Trask is a hard cuss." He heaved a long sigh, then said, "Doctor, if you can get it fixed up, I'd be mighty proud to have Sloan's job."

They drove on through the moonlight and the thickly falling snow, the prisoners grumbling and shouting curses at Doc and the boy.

When they reached the trail that led to Huffman's place, Doc kept old Freddy going right on.

"I can watch them two hellions, doctor," Luke said, "while you see Ezra."

Doc smiled. "No need to see him, not yet, anyhow. That was just something for you to hear. I saw you tighten up. Then I was sure you knew about the bags in my sleigh."

A half-dozen horsemen, headed by the sheriff, rode out from behind the curtain of snow.

Doc felt the boy stiffen as he pulled old Freddy to a halt.

"Buck Lawson's up there in the mountains on a ledge of rock—dead," Doc told Trask and his deputies.

A spare smile spread over the sheriff's face as he wagged his head at the doctor. "I'd take off my hat to you, Doc, if it wasn't so derned cold and snowin'. You ought to be wearin' the badge instead of me."

Doc shook his head. "I'll stick to the pills and powders. But give me a year or so, Tom, and I'll have a first-class deputy for you. Luke, here. He was the one who shot Lawson, when the bandit was ready to gun us down."

Trask eyed the doctor narrowly. "Then I reckon your new hostler gets in on the reward Cooper put up?"

"Half. For my end I got a couple of pretty good projects I've been trying to get Cooper to shell out for." Doc chuckled. "Now he'll do it—with his left hand."

SHERIFF TRASK and his deputies rode off with the bandits, and Luke asked, "How did the sheriff know anything about me taking the job."

Doc smiled as he clucked to Freddy. "We talked about it some this morning, right after Sloan found the bags in the sleigh. I told him how I hoped it would be."

Luke blinked. "You took the gold out? But you sure took a long chance on getting shot. Judas! Why did you do it? You could have stopped the whole thing by making me look under the seat."

"Maybe," Doc said. "That would have been sort of foolish, wouldn't it? Seeing what I set out to do."

"Yeah," Luke said, flushing with his understanding of what the doctor meant. "Yeah, I reckon it would." He nodded. "It's pretty plain to me now why folks think about you like they do. Like Trask saying he'd take off his hat. He meant it. I reckon that must make you feel pretty good—and pretty big, too."

Doc flapped the lines over Freddy's back, and smiled a little. He hadn't taken the ride in a blizzard to gain in Trask's esteem. He had known how he stood with the sheriff.

"It does make me feel pretty good, Luke, but not big. When a man begins to feel big, his soul gets small. Remember that, son. But, I'm a rich man, Luke, maybe as rich as any man in the county."

"I'll bet you are," Luke agreed wholeheartedly. "The richest man in the Territory, if you count friends instead of dollars."

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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*Matson's gun whipped out, roared once*

# SIX-GUNS at SUNDOWN

## By William Collins Brown

*Seven years of accumulated hate quivered in the hand holding the gun*

HE REINED up his steeldust on the oak ridge and let his gray eyes wander for a long time over the town that was spread out beyond the willow-fringed creek. The vista below brought into fresh focus the flood of events that were being reenacted in his mind. A glint like cold steel came into Bart Maston's eyes, and the lines of his lean face deepened and grew taut.

The years hadn't changed Sundown any,

he thought. The change had been in him. When a fellow at twenty-one, persuades a pretty girl to promise she'll marry him, and makes a down payment on a small spread with good water and grass, then the next seven years hold glittering promises of a full and satisfying life. Instead, it had become a black void; void except for the hell and bitterness it had brought him. The only promise was that the slow grind of agony would pass, bring him back again to square accounts with one Webb Altern.

The hate that festered within became all-consuming, filled him beyond the point which he could absorb and contain. As a safety-valve for his sanity, by day he'd translated his hate to work. The vicious, killing pace he set on the State farms had earned him the enmity of his fellow inmates, kept his guards in awe. At night he would lie on his hard bunk, planning how he'd meet Webb Altern—and flexing his fingers and forearms to keep them from growing stiff and slow.

As he sat there on the ridge, a dreaminess came into his hard eyes, momentarily erasing the bitter curl of full lips.

"Seven years," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Lily and I would have been married, had the place paid out before now. And maybe a kid . . ."

Someone had ridden his blazed-face sorrel one night while he was away and held up the Butterfield stage. And that fateful next morning the loot was found in his barn under a bunch of loose hay.

Webb Altern had just become marshal and he was bending over backward to make a name for himself. A posse led by Bit Rawner had joined the new marshal, and together they found the stuff. It had been too easy; it looked too pat to Maston.

WHILE he and Bit both had been courting the same girl, he'd finally got the inside track with her. Yet he and Bit had maintained friendly relations, bought one another drinks. Bit was one of those easy met, open fellows who'd laugh just as loudly and quickly when he lost a good pot as the fellow who won it. It was obvious he had been taken aback when they found the [illegible]ds in Maston's barn, and privately told Maston that he would never have joined the posse if he could have foreseen events.

Bit had kept Maston in makings, and come over as often as permitted to play penny ante with him through the bars while awaiting trial. He even bought out Maston's equity in the ranch, adding a small profit—money that was sorely needed to hire lawyers in the vain defense.

But with Webb Altern it had been a different story. Webb was quiet, but proud and ambitious. He had pushed the evidence for Maston's conviction with boundless energy.

The conclusion that someone had framed him became a positive conviction with Maston as Webb pushed the case. And after Maston had been in prison a year, he got a short note from Lily Wilmer saying she'd married Webb. To Maston, that was the positive clincher by furnishing Webb's motive for getting Maston out of the way.

The steeldust snorted gnats from his nostrils, yanking Bart Maston back to the grim present. Shadows already were dipping into the valley below. In a couple of hours it would be sundown.

Maston grinned sardonically. He had written Webb, warning him to oil his guns for today, but he would let him stew in suspense until sundown.

The steeldust picked its way leisurely down through the scrub to the fringe of willows along the creek. Maston still had a bit of time to kill. He slid down, slapped at the traildust on his shoulders and going upstream, took a long drink from the cool, clear running water. He was stretching out on the bermuda to ease tired muscles when he snapped upright suddenly, gun out, every sense wary and alert.

The willows rustled again. Suddenly a long object arched toward him, struck against the heavy cartridge belt, falling to the grass. Then Maston's darting eyes picked up the small form crouching in the willows. It dawned suddenly that he'd been ambushed by a kid playing "Injun." He grinned, picked up the arrow, waiting.

With a shrill warwhoop, the "Injun" charged, brandishing a long bow and wooden

tomahawk. Turkey feathers waved from his tawny hair, red clay warpaint smeared his freckled cheeks, and sky-blue eyes sparkled with feigned savage ferocity.

Maston sneaked his Colt back into its holster, sat there grinning.

"Aw, heck, mister!" The kid stopped his stamping, his young face registering deep disgust. "Don't you know how to play Injun?"

"Well," Maston hesitated awkwardly. "It was kind of unexpected, and it's been a long time since I was massacred last."

"Shucks, you're supposed to fall dead! Then I take your scalp!"

Silently Maston arose, cut a hank of hair from his horse's tail, tied it up and tossed it to the kid. "Here's my scalp—you can hang it to dry in your wigwam!"

The kid grinned in appreciation, exposing a missing tooth. Maston knew then that he had won forgiveness.

"I think I'll call you chief Horsetail." The kid grinned, stuffing the "scalp" in his dad's borrowed belt which encircled him twice.

"Thanks. That makes sense—horse sense!"

"You can come back alive, too," the kid promised seriously, "if you'll let me keep your scalp!"

"I'm much obliged," Maston said gravely. "You can keep my scalp—I can get lots of 'em." He looked at the paint daubed warrior. "Who are you?" he asked suddenly. "Chief Missing Tooth?"

The kid stuck his tongue in the gap in his teeth, and grimaced. "I don't think I'd like that name!" His freckled cheek twisted up, remembering a painful event.

"Hurt when your pap pulled it, eh?"

"Gee, it hurt worse than anything—even worse than being scalped!" He looked thoughtful a moment, dug his big toe into the grass.

SUDDENLY as the thought hit him, he stuck out his chest proudly, straining for deep gutteral tones: "Me heap big chief—Chief Quanah Parker!"

Maston feigned astonishment. "You mean the last war chief of the Comanches?" Then he nodded his head in approval. "Quanah Parker was a great man!"

The kid swelled with pride, appraised Maston with rapidly growing admiration. "You could be a heap big chief, too," he conceded finally. "A much bigger chief than you are!"

With pride, the kid displayed his weapons. The knife and tomahawk had been carefully whittled from soft pine. The bow of seasoned willow was carefully balanced, and a canvas quiver of straight-shafted arrows had *real* flint tips!

"My daddy made these for me," he said proudly. "He's the best daddy in the whole world! Sometimes he plays Injun with me, too!"

As Maston fingered those toys, a hazy look came into the hardness of his eyes. The kid had a good father, all right. A lot of work had gone into those things—a labor of love. He thought he would have made lots of things just like those for his boy, if he'd ever had one.

His hard hands went out gently, gripped those small shoulders, trembled a little as they ran softly over his cheeks, through the tousled, tawny hair of his head. The kid's face became grave, reflected his puzzlement as he stood silently, wide eyes searching the tall stranger's face, and wondering about the strange emotions he saw there.

He was just the kind of kid he would like to have had. Maston hoped fervently nothing would ever come into this kid's life to shatter his ideals or embitter him . . . Silently, he climbed on his horse.

"You'll come back and play Injun with me some more, Chief Horsetail?" The young face brightened with hope.

"Sure, Chief Quanah Parker!"

The kid trotted after him for a distance. "Are you going to live long in Sundown?" he asked, eagerly. Bart didn't answer that.

Maston glanced back westward. Not long now until sundown. He touched heels to flanks.

"Maybe."

Maston slid from the saddle at the stables on the west side of Sundown. Old Ritter still ran the place. Ritter had been on the stage that night. At Maston's trial Ritter had sworn that the horse the bandit rode that

night was Maston's blazed sorrel.

Now Ritter met Maston out the front, looking much older, his black eyes revealing a hard glitter. The limp he'd carried since bronc-busting days seemed worse. Along with the recognition in Ritter's eyes, Maston read hostility.

"I'd like to put up the bronc for the night," Maston said, skipping formalities.

"It's public," Ritter said, "to paying customers."

Maston compressed his lips, silently tossed the oldster a silver dollar.

"Been sort of expectin' you," Ritter said.

"Webb Altern in town?"

"Usually is."

"I'm kind of lookin' for him," Maston said, rolling a cigarette.

"Webb ain't a hard man to find—by a man hunting trouble."

Maston held a match to his cigarette, sucked deeply, then blew out the match with smoke.

"Webb's a pretty good marshal, eh?"

Ritter took the steeldust's reins, none too gently.

"Sure, Webb's the best!" he said, leading the horse away with a limp. "Even if he does have a family to think about!"

Maston walked through the dust slowly toward the main group of false-fronts a couple of hundred yards farther on. No movement there met his gaze.

Several saddle horses stood at the hitch-rails, and further on, waited a buckboard and a couple of fringe-topped surreys. Several townsmen and punchers lounged about lazily on the board walks. Shadows were lengthening as the bright sun neared the western horizon. The thought kept running through Maston's mind: "It's been a long, long wait!" Maston loosened his Colt in its holster, making sure there'd be no hitch.

As he approached the Johnny Jump-Up Saloon, Maston saw a vaguely familiar figure detach itself from a gallery post, move toward him.

Bit Rawner rushed up, grinning.

"Bart!" He stuck out a hand. "It's good to see you, old fellow!" He ran his eyes over Maston's lean form, slapped him on the back. "I'm buyin' the drinks!"

RAWNER'S spontaneous friendliness warmed a bit the cold bitterness inside Maston. Bit looked soft; his jaws were flabby, and he was developing a paunch. Maston wondered vaguely what Bit was doing. He wore range garb, packed a gun, but he was untanned. Gambling, maybe.

He wondered a little at Bit Rawner's friendliness. Since neither had got the girl they both were stuck on, maybe Bit felt a kindred sort of affinity for Maston. He let Bit buy the drinks.

It seemed no one had seen Maston up close enough for recognition, and the Johnny Jump-Up was empty. Even the barkeep was new, and Maston was glad; he didn't want to meet acquaintances and answer questions yet. Bit could tell what he wanted to know.

They sat at a small table, Maston facing the half-doors. Bit Rawner's eyes sparkled with friendly excitement as he talked. Maston wondered if it had a forced quality or whether it was his own lack of responsiveness due to the bitterness inside him. As his mind followed Bit's talk, his eyes hovered from that door to the view through the front window into the street.

"I know why you're here, pard, and I'm all for you," Bit confided. "You must be pretty solid, fellow. If I'd bucked a stacked deck like you did, I guess I'd have gone batty. But—" Bit lowered his voice, bent closer. "But you got to watch Webb. He's slick! They'll tell you he's made a good marshal, but that's a matter of opinion. Personally, I don't like the way he's put some of the notches on his gun."

"I'm not afraid of my speed," Maston said grimly. "I've taken care of that."

"Webb's not fast," Bit said. "Just greased trickiness! The minute you meet him, Bart, make him go for his gun. He'll try to talk to you, pretending he wants to iron out your troubles. Don't listen to him. It's his style to talk first, persuasive like, to wear off your keen edge of readiness—then gun you unexpectedly." Bit leaned forward, repeating for emphasis, "Don't let him talk to you. Soon as you meet—*make him draw!*"

Bit poured himself another drink, reached across and turned Maston's glass bottom

up. "No more drinks for you, pard," he laughed. "You got to keep a clear eye and steady hand!"

Maston's gaze traveled through the window and suddenly he tensed. His eyes drew to cold slits, his lips tightened against his teeth.

Bit's gaze followed Maston's. "That was Webb!" he whispered. "Just going into that hardware store across the street!"

Maston got up, noticed the barkeeper was paying them no attention, shining his glass. "Go to Webb," he said, "and tell him I'm waiting down further in one of the saloons, and saw him go into the hardware store. Tell him when he comes out, I'll meet him in the middle of the street."

"Sure, Bart." Bit's intense eyes danced with excitement. "Sure!"

"Webb will like the idea of me being further down, eastward," Maston said quietly. "It would put the setting sun squarely in my eyes, and he'll think that point is an advantage. Except, when he steps out, I'll be out front here—with the sun right in his face!"

Bit grinned, getting up. "You've got a head on you," he said, leaving.

Maston watched Bit Rawner push through the doorway, saw a sparrow flit in under the gallery roof. Then something thudded into the wall by Bit's face, and he jerked around, spitting out an oath.

Maston comprehended instantly what had happened. He grinned, his mind being jerked completely off his grim business with Webb Altern. The freckled little kid he'd met playing on the creek had twanged an arrow at the sparrow, narrowly missing Bit as he appeared unexpectedly.

Maston moved quietly to the window, saw the frightened look leap into the kid's face as Bit angrily snatched up the arrow, broke it, and jammed it into his hip pocket. He saw the hurt, desperate look as those wide eyes clung to that ruined arrow. Tears welled up, and he started running blindly down the street.

Maston swallowed. "Bit oughtn't to have done that," he muttered.

He saw Bit cross over, go into the hardware store. In a couple of minutes he reappeared, crossed back, going eastward out of view. He was followed a moment later by Webb Altern who came out into the middle of the dusty street, moving eastward in slow, measured steps.

MASTON quietly stepped out into the rutted roadway, behind Webb. The sight of Webb had set the hate pulsing anew through him. He wondered if Webb was grandstanding with that proud carriage, easy confident stride. Webb looked mighty sure of himself. He hadn't even removed his coat—just opened it and pushed it back.

The sun, big and red now, was low in the middle of the street, full on Webb's broad back.

With the shadows from his legs looking like they were made from high stilts, Maston moved toward the middle of the street. When his shadow crossed Webb's path, he stopped.

"Webb!" he called.

Webb spun, stared into the blinding sun with startled, blinking eyes. He pulled his hat low, cocked his head side to side trying to shield out the sun. Maston knew his own form was rimmed with a blinding fringe of light, and grinned with vicious pleasure. The full flood of light into Webb's face made the fifty feet seem scarcely half that distance.

Bart Maston waited, boots wide in the dust, lean form slightly bent. The butt of his Colt glistened inches below his open palm.

"Bart," Webb called, "I've got to talk to you! There's something—"

It was just like Bit Rawner warned Maston it would be. Bit's words tumbled through Maston's mind, seemed to blot out what Webb was trying to say. Webb's treachery was conforming so exactly to the pattern Bit had described that it now seemed a rehearsal.

"You had seven years to talk, Webb!" Maston cut in. "Now it's time to pay off. If you're not yellow, Webb—*go for your gun!*"

He could see Webb's slitted eyes, fighting to penetrate that blinding glare. Maston knew he had Webb; Webb knew it, too. He'd give Webb the jump—then he'll kill

him. Spot-lighted under the bright glare, Maston saw decision creep into Webb's features; saw the hope for arbitration die in the final conviction that there was no other way.

Then, that last second before gun-thunder would roll, there burst upon the bated atmosphere of Sundown a sudden high, child-like scream, desperate in its appeal. A small form raced across the street, flung itself against the thighs of Webb Altern, a bow and wooden tomahawk dropping forgotten in the dust.

"Daddy—Daddy!" the lad cried, grappling at Webb's holster. "Don't—please don't shoot Chief Horsetail!"

Bart Maston saw Webb frantically trying to push the kid aside, not daring to take his eyes off him; heard Webb's stern voice urging away the kid. Maston's mind reeled from the impact of the truth.

That kid who'd given him the only bit of pleasure in seven years was Webb and Lily's boy! His mind raced ahead, suddenly aghast that in another second he would have killed that kid's father. Nausea twisted his stomach and a paralyzing numbness flowed through him. In his mind he could see the shock, the deep hurt that would forever be in the kid's eyes when he'd think of his false friend, "Chief Horsetail."

Silently, Bart Maston turned his back, started walking away.

Murmurs came from doorways, windows. He was dully aware of an audience of a score of men.

"Yellow!" He heard the deeply knifing words.

"Yellow, hell!" someone snapped. "That kid just saved his pa's life!"

Gaunt and lonely in the middle of the street, Maston walked slowly into the dying sun. In a few minutes it would sink behind the oak ridge. And in a few minutes he'd be riding away from Sundown forever.

He took a deep breath and it seemed exhilarating, intoxicating. He lifted his shoulders, suddenly aware that the weight of long cankering hate and bitterness had lifted from his soul. He smiled gradually, knowing that at last he was a free man.

Ritter wasn't around when Maston reached the stables. He went in and got his horse. As he was leading it out, Webb Altern suddenly blocked his passage.

Instinctively, Maston's gunhand dropped—then fell away limp.

"No gunplay, Webb," Maston said without malice. "Go back to your family."

Webb shook his head. "We're going to talk, Bart," he said.

WIDE-EYED, Maston stared, surprised at the friendliness in Webb's tone.

"You had me on a spot back there just now," Webb said. "I didn't have a chance, and you know it."

"I arranged it that way. But that kid," Maston murmured. "I couldn't—"

"What you did took more nerve than to shoot."

"Thanks, Webb. Now if you'll just step aside—"

"Wait, Bart. You've been wrong all the time. True, I sent you to prison. But I thought I was doing my duty. I didn't know then that you were framed—didn't know it for a long time. By the time I had worked it out, you'd served your time. Since then I've been trying to get in touch with you—wanted to do something to right some of the injustice done you."

As Maston stared into Webb's eyes, he knew he was telling the truth. Confusion welled up in his mind, a confused mixture of contradictions. A storm rising off a new quarter, started building up inside.

"If you didn't frame me, Webb—who did?"

"I'll tell you—and I have the proof, Bart. The man you want is—"

The gun's report came like a sudden thunderclap. The big barn vibrated to its sound, and a big wind seemed to push Webb forward.

Maston saw the life go out of Webb's eyes, caught the lifeless form, eased it to the haystrewn earth. A quick shuffle of retreating footsteps behind, then a stable gate slammed. He caught a glimpse of a fleeing form, his gun roared once, and the footsteps faded out the back.

Matson stared down at Webb's dead body, the smoking six-gun in his hand.

When he looked up, Ritter was standing there, the emotions of raw accusation twitching the muscles of his face. Maston stared back at Ritter speechless, the full horror of the situation striking home.

The oldster backed slowly, limping on his crooked leg, the fear on his face showing he expected Maston to kill him for catching him in the act of murder.

"Wait!" Maston pleaded. "Somebody shot Webb from back in the stables!"

He saw it was of no use. It was sundown, and shadows filled the barn and stables. He'd have to hurry.

Forgetting Ritter, he leaped toward the stables, passed through two pine-board gates between rows of stalls. Horses nickered, some lunged with fright. At the far end of the long building, a wide door leading outside stood ajar. Maston knew the killer must have gone out this way.

Just outside, he stooped suddenly to pick up a slender object. Suddenly now, he knew who killed Webb—killed him because he was about to call his name as the man who'd framed Maston into prison.

The killer had worked it slick and with deadly opportunism. Webb's murder had become a perfect frame on Maston again by drawing Maston's shot. It would be easy indeed to convince a jury that he shot Webb down from behind after wilting from Webb's gun in the open!

As Maston bent to a run, he saw Ritter in the street limping frantically toward town, fear in every jerky movement. He knew he had to get to those men downtown ahead of Ritter before Ritter started yelling his head off.

He stayed behind the buildings, running hard. When he came to the back of the Johnny Jump-Up, he pulled up, walked casually in the back door.

Several men were inside. Some looked up, recognizing him, gave him one cold glance, then ignored him. It was evident that the sounds of those two shots hadn't reached inside the saloon.

Bit Rawner was at the bar, nervously fingering an empty whisky glass. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Maston, then poured and gulped another drink.

In that one quick glance, Maston saw the sudden hounded fear in Rawner's intensely blue eyes. Then Bit turned, and that slender object in Maston's hand caught his eyes, held them transfixed. Then when he looked straight at Maston, he must have read what was in Maston's mind.

Bit Rawner went for his gun.

Maston expected the play. His gun whipped out, roared once.

The bullet broke Bit's arm. His Colt clattered to the sawdust.

Men leaped for cover, and the instant the gun thundered, the old hostler bounded through the doorway. His mouth was open to shout something, but it froze in his wrinkled throat.

Bit grabbed his wounded arm, slumped groaning against the bar, face ashen.

MASTON moved up quickly, grabbed Bit in the collar and swung him around. He stuck in Bit's face the slender object he'd picked up behind the stables.

"You lost this out of your pocket when you ran from the stables after shooting Webb in the back! It's the arrow belonging to the kid. I saw you break it and stick it into your back pocket!"

Maston swung around. "Men—" he said loudly, "Bit just murdered Webb. Shot him in the back!"

A stunned silence gripped the men, then erupted in an angry murmur. The old hostler was trying to make himself heard. Maston caught his eye, motioned him forward.

"Tell them, Ritter!" he demanded with hard challenge.

"Webb's been—murdered!" Ritter almost choked on the words.

The men pressed forward angrily. Some reached angry hands toward Bit, who cringed back, pale and trembling.

Maston shook him, cold fury in his voice, saying, "Tell them why you killed Webb, Bit! Tell them!"

Bit cringed back. "No—for God's sake get me to a doctor. I'm—sick!"

Maston's jaws flexed with contempt.

"I'll tell them, Bit," Maston said. "Sure—I'll tell them! For seven years I thought Webb framed me into prison on that Butter-

field Stage holdup. I came back here to kill Webb for that. But I was wrong. It wasn't Webb. It was you who did that robbery, framed me. You thought to get me out of your way so you could get my girl. It took Webb a long time to find out the truth. You suspected Webb had found out something, and would tell me. That's why you didn't want me to talk to Webb. That's why you argued Webb would trick me with talk.

"When I turned my back on Webb's gun today, he followed me to the stables to tell me the truth. But you followed too, and it would have worked if you hadn't lost your temper and broken that kid's arrow. They would have hanged me for Webb's murder, and you'd had us both!"

"Lies," Bit snarled, holding onto the bar. "All lies!"

Bit was tough, and the color was coming back into his face. But strangely, his knees began buckling. He sank almost to the sawdust, left hand falling on his Colt lying on the floor. Suddenly he was coming up fast with the gun.

"Look out!" someone shouted.

Maston slapped the gun aside from his stomach as its roar blasted at his eardrums. There was no time to draw. His hard knuckles chopped savagely into Bit's jaw as the gun roared again. It was a wild shot, flung blindly. It caught Ritter in the middle, caved him in without a groan.

Maston's chopping blows spilled Bit in a motionless heap on the floor, his gun rolling from his limp fingers. Someone leaped astride Bit, gun out. "Let's finish the dirty killer!" the man yelled.

Maston grabbed the gun. "Wait!" he panted. "Save him to hang. Too bad he can't hang twice!"

"Ritter, there, ain't got no folks," another man said finally. "But someone's gotta tell Webb's wife and kid."

All eyes gradually turned upon Maston, and he knew he had been delegated as spokesman.

Maston went to Webb's funeral next day. He knew by the grief that seemed to rip the heart out of Lily that Webb had been the right man from the first. She caught Maston the next day when he was saddling to leave Sundown, the tragedy still stark in her eyes.

"I want to thank you, Bart," she said, laying a hand on his arm, "for what you did for Jimmy. People told me, Bart." She paused, bit her curved, full lips.

Sunlight struck fire in her fluffed yellow hair, and the dimple that he used to tease her about was still in her left cheek. Maston thought she was still as pretty as ever—or more so. The old storm dormant inside him began brewing again.

"Jimmy's a great kid." Maston's own voice seemed far away. His teeth clamped tightly, and he stared abstractly toward the horizon.

"Jimmy needs you, Bart," he heard her soft voice saying. "And the people here need another good man for marshal."

Maston came to with a start. He gave Lily a quick look, started hurriedly away.

"Where you going, Bart?" she called, puzzled.

Maston smiled back over his shoulder. "I'm going after that marshal job—while it's still open," he said.

## *Real Smoke!*

**NOBODY can play cowboys and Indians with more realism than the kids who live out West today. One of their newest toys consists of a revolver that ejects a "real" puff of "smoke." This is actually only a miniature cloud of harmless powder, forced by an equally small bellows, whenever the trigger of the gun is pulled. 5000 puffs can be loaded into the shooting arm at one time.**

***—Mark Knight***

# THE MAVERICKERS

*Mayne Reid, Texas brush-popper, took up a homestead*

*after the Civil War—and ran right*

*into a rustling frame that called for hot guns, cold nerve,*

*and all the strategy he could muster!*

## A Novelet by LES SAVAGE, JR.

### CHAPTER I

*The Same as a Rustler*

THE sound of a horse, crashing through the brush outside his two-dog-run cabin, brought Mayne Reid to his feet. In thoughtless reaction, he took three long strides to where his gun hung in its holster from a peg on the wall, and slipped it free.

It was a Navy Colt, one of the few things he had brought back from the War Between the States. He had returned only a few months ago, to a land drained by four years of war and torn by the conflicts and tensions left by that war.

He stood against the wall, gun in hand, listening to the rider pull up outside. He made a tall, gaunt figure in the dusk of the room. His hair was black and shaggy, and the hardships of those years so recently

*"Drop your gun," Stennet ordered*

passed had melted the flesh off his heavy shoulders, leaving them in a tense, forward stoop.

He still wore a pair of Confederate cavalry trousers and a heavy double-breasted shirt, already ripped and scarred by the last months in this Texas brush. He felt himself lift a little at the squeak of saddle-leather from outside, then a feminine voice called his name. The tension was washed from him. With a rueful smile he slipped his gun back in his holster, and opened the door.

A woman stood there beside a blowing sweat-mottled steel-dust horse. The half-light of early evening revealed her dimly, casting a vague hint of shadow beneath the breasts swelling proudly against her white broadcloth blouse. An abundance of glossy black curls framed the pale oval of her face, beneath the flat-topped Stetson she wore, the dusk turning her eyes to shadowed recesses and making the redness of her pouting underlips almost black. Her hip pushed its mature curve insistently into her heavy

leather riding habit as she shifted her weight to come and meet him.

"Caskie," he said. "You shouldn't be comin' out here at this time of night. There's too much trouble brewin'."

"I had to see you, Mayne," she said, throatily.

They had reached each other now, and he took her in his arms, reading in her voice the same hunger he felt. For a moment she met his fierce kiss. Then she pulled away.

"I wish we could stand here all night, Mayne," she said breathlessly, "but I didn't come for this. Irl Allison and his bunch of brush-poppers are gathering. I saw Obed Phillips. He said they meant to march to our house in protest against this new bill to outlaw mavericking that Dad is pushing through."

REID frowned intensely, then shook his head.

"I knew the brushmen were mad about it, but I didn't know they had reached this point."

"You've got to come, Mayne. You're the only one of the brushmen Dad trusts. The feeling between the brushmen and the big ranchers is even more bitter than it was before the War. I'm afraid there's going to be violence."

Reid found himself looking past her at the texture of evening filling the Texas brush around his shack. He knew how right she was. During the four years of war most of the young men had been drawn away from the ranches, leaving the cattle to run wild and increase, without anyone to tend or brand them.

When the war was over and the men started to return, there were no markets for the beef, and mavericking had become an accepted custom. If a man wanted to start a herd, he simply went out into the brush and slapped his brand on any unbranded stuff he came across. There were so many cattle and so little market that the big ranchers actually encouraged their own hands to maverick.

Then the Kansas cattle market had opened up and the beef suddenly became valuable, but the custom of mavericking had become so generally accepted that the big men could not stop it. In the minds of the big operators, who were losing hundreds of cattle a day, mavericking became synonymous with rustling.

Reid hesitated, then turned reluctantly and moved towards the corral. He slung the tack on his blue-tick roan and brought it back around front, to find Caskie in saddle. They lined out northward through the Border brushland, following narrow, secretive trails till the mesquite thickets began to give way to open parks.

In one of these stretches of grassed-over prairie, they came up with a group of shadowy riders who had pulled up to water in a trickle of a stream. Reid squinted through the darkening night to recognize Irl Allison's tall, slope-shouldered figure, and hailed him.

"Evenin', Mayne." Allison's voice held none of its usual warmth, and the tired smile that creased his gaunt, disillusioned features seemed to come with an effort.

"I hear you're riding to Stennet's to talk him out of puttin' through this maverick law," Reid said, pulling his roan up. "Do you think its a good idea to go in a bunch like this?"

"Maybe you'd like us to send a delegate?" Karl Venth answered.

Reid turned slightly, to see Harry and Karl Venth, father and son, cast in the same vicious, brush-scarred mold. They had been to war too, but nobody in the regular service had ever come up with them, and it was rumored they had ridden with Quantrell.

Karl, the son, had adopted all his old brush gear upon returning, a dirty horse-thief hat with a bullet hole in its crown, filthy rawhide ducking jacket and Mexican leggins that fitted his bowed, catty legs like a greasy second skin. His face was hatchet-sharp beneath the hat, and even in this gloom, his eyes glistened like broken glass from their hollow sockets.

"Maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea," Reid told Karl. "You've all got such a neck full of hell now that if you go in a bunch you're liable to spill over and cause more

trouble than you can ever patch up."

Harry Venth had the same sharp face as his son, though time had filled it with furrows and robbed him of so many teeth that his lips were pursed like the top of an ancient satchel. From these, he shot a stream of yellow tobacco juice at the water where their horses stood.

"Maybe you'd like to be the delegate," he said sarcastically. "You know the Stennet family so well."

"I don't care who you send," Reid said.

"I sure as hell wouldn't trust a man who was in love with Stennet's daughter," Karl Venth said viciously.

THERE was an assenting murmur from the other brush-men. Reid looked in helpless plea around at their faces, held in sullen watchfulness. Obed Phillips was Irl Allison's partner, a salty, acerbic old man in frayed linsey-woolsey jeans and a bull-whacker's hickory shirt. The expression of his rheumy eyes, resting on Reid, was one of distrustful speculation. Irl Allison was also looking around at them, at George Karrick, the redhead from Quartero Thickets, and gaunt, skinny Noah Lattimer who had a small spread right on the Border.

"Maybe you're judgin' Reid too harshly," Allison said. "He's always been a brush-popper, and his folks was before him."

"And he's still tryin' to get us to form an association with the big operators," offered Lattimer. "Who ever heard of that?"

"You're hearin' of it now," Reid told them. "The day's comin' when we'll have to band together. We can't keep fightin' each other forever. What's wrong with a cattleman's association?"

"Nothing, except the big men will have all the power and make all the rules to suit themselves. We'll be right back where we started."

"Not if it's based on a system of votes," Reid told them. "You are in greater numbers than the big men. Somethin' can be done to give you equal voice."

"Stow it back in the warbag, Reid," said Harry Venth disgustedly. "We've listened to that too many times."

"Maybe he's right," Allison offered. "I'd rely on his word, Venth."

"Well, I wouldn't," Karl Venth told them.

Harry Venth spat again, furrowed lips forming a wicked grin. "Now, son, you don't want to make out Reid a liar, do you?"

"Make whatever you want out of it," Karl growled. "It's like I said before. He's runin' around with the daughter of one of the biggest operators, ain't he? Would you call her a good influence?"

Reid sidled his fretting blue-tick up against the man's horse with a flirt of his reins, putting himself leg-to-leg with the younger Venth. "I've taken a lot of lip off you, Karl. Just don't start in on Caskie."

The man's eyes glittered from beneath his hat. "I'll talk about who I please. Money don't change a woman like that. She's still nothin' more'n a two-bit—"

Reid reached up to hook the front of Karl's filthy shirt, his voice cutting the man off. "Don't finish that."

"I said I'd talk about who I please," snarled Venth, hooking up an arm to try and knock Reid's hand free.

Reid blocked it and swung around in the saddle to smash at the man with his free fist. It caught Karl on the point of his jaw, pitching him heavily out of the saddle to strike the ground flat, arms and legs spread-eagled by the force of it. Reid had to catch at his reins again and pull up hard to keep the blue-tick from bolting.

At the same time, he heard Irl Allison's sharp voice, from behind him:

"That'll do, Harry!"

With the roan dancing excitedly beneath him, Reid wheeled to see Irl Allison holding his gun on Karl's father. Harry Venth's gun was halfway from its holster, stopped there. His face was still turned toward Reid, the murderous intent stamped there plain as a fresh brand.

"Maybe we'd better split up after all," Irl Allison said. "If we're going to fight like this all the time we'll never get anything done."

Karl Venth rolled over and got heavily to his feet, staring hot-eyed up at Reid. "Never mind," he said, finally. "We can

take care of this some other time."

"Yes," echoed his father. "Some time real soon."

## CHAPTER II

### *Ultimatum*

IT WAS full night when the brushmen reached the Chipped Moon ranch house. David Stennet, owner of the spread, had started from scratch himself, and the house had originally been no more than a simple dog-run cabin, but it had expanded through the years until its rooms sprawled out over the flats in haphazard wings, with slab-rock chimneys rising skyward from the sloping roofs of half a dozen rooms. A Mexican porch had been strung clear along the front, a shake roof supported by peeled *puntales* of cottonwood. It was before this that the hitchracks stood, already partly filled with horses.

Caskie preceded the brushmen into the lamplit living room. There was the hushed, restrained rustle of movement through the long room, as they filed in. Reid saw that several of the bigger operators were already here.

One of them, Gordon Walker, stood near the fireplace, a drink in his hand, talking with another, Will Malone. Walker was a tall, raven-haired man in a mauve fustian. The old brush-scars lacing the backs of his hands attested to his earlier experience in the brush, though he had probably not touched one of his Double X steers in years.

Behind a heavy oak table at the far end of the room sat David Stennet. He was a deeply sun-bronzed man in his early fifties, almost completely bald, with a narrow, stony face and cold, humorless blue eyes.

In a large armchair at his left sat his brother, Bomar Stennet. Heavy-set, vigorous, his leonine head was covered with a mop of prematurely white hair, and the blue eyes beneath beamed with good humor. He affected a clawhammer coat of English kersimere, striped trousers held tight under the instep, and patent leather boots.

David Stennet drummed lean fingers impatiently on the table top until they were all settled down, then he spoke in a clipped, chilly voice.

"I've heard rumors you were comin' tonight to protect this maverickin' law, Allison. Walker and Malone have even ridden over to hear what you have to say. If you have somethin' new to offer, we'll listen. If it's the same old talk, I won't support it."

The lines left by labor and disillusionment seemed to settle more deeply into Allison's Lincolnesque face. "We're here just to protest the law, Stennet. Especially in the form you're proposin'. If you make it so you'll be able to pick up all the steers that's supposed to have been mavericked by the little men, you'll ruin us."

Gordon Walker put his empty glass down and removed a cigar from his pocket, carefully paring its end. "And if we don't make it like that, Allison, we'll be allowin' you to get away with half our stock. Followin' the War, you maverickers blossomed like devil's head after a rain, and most of the maverickin' was done on somebody else's land."

"But there was also a lot of us who had been here before," snapped George Karrick, pushing through the other brushmen till his red head blazed in the lamplight. "We'd bought up Spanish grants, or homesteaded, and it belonged to us just as much as yours to you."

"Then you should have kept the other maverickers out for your own sake," David Stennet answered coldly.

NOAH LATTIMER craned his scrawny, leathery neck up from behind the bunch of brushpoppers.

"You wasn't talkin' that way before the Kansas markets opened up. You was glad to have them unbranded cattle taken off your hands."

"But now the market has opened up, that's the point." David Stennet leaned forward, fingers gripping the table edge grim-

ly. "And if we don't do somethin', we won't have any cattle to sell. The rustlers have taken advantage of this situation till we don't know where maverickin' ends and out-and-out stealin' begins. I have no way of countin' how much beef I've lost to maverickin'. I do know I've lost half my herds to rustlin'. Mavericking has allowed rustlers to flourish in the brush like they've never flourished before. And it's so easy to slip from maverickin' to rustlin' that half the real mavericks don't know the difference."

"In other words, you're deliberately tryin' to squeeze us out," said Irl Allison.

"He didn't mean that, Irl," answered Bomar Stennet, with a genial smile.

"It amounts to the same thing," Allison answered.

"Let it then!" half-shouted David Stennet. "We can't set around and be ruined by rustlin' that's called maverickin'."

"Then you won't come to any agreement?" asked Allison.

"What agreement is there to come to?" said David Stennet. "The maverick law is goin' through. Bomar is goin' to start stumping the state next month. He's includin' that in his platform. As soon as he's elected to the legislature he's submittin' the maverick bill."

Allison's shoulders dropped in a dogged defeat. There was a sullen mutter among the brushmen, a fluttering, acrid scraping of their boots against the floor. Seeing their rising anger, Reid half-raised his hand, speaking to Stennet.

"Then why can't you ease up on it? Take out that part about takin' back—"

"Shut up, Reid!" shouted Karl Venth. "Allison's speakin' for us."

The others backed the younger Venth up with an angry volley of shouts. Reid turned to face them, his gaunt young face red with anger and humiliation. Allison glanced at him in helpless apology. Then he lifted his shoulders with a heavy breath and turned to Stennet.

"If you don't make some kind of adjustment, Stennet, there's goin' to be trouble."

"Ah!" scoffed Gordon Walker, flicking a cigar ash from his gaudy fustian. "Now the man threatens us."

"It's not a threat," answered Allison. "It's only a fact I can't answer for these men if you push 'em any further."

Stennet jumped to his feet, unable to control himself any longer, and struck the table with the flat of his hand. "If it's a fight they want, they'll get it! I've put up with all I'm going to from your gang of rustlers."

Karl Venth's eyes flashed wickedly. "That's one word we won't take layin' down, Stennet. We're no more rustlers than you are. Lee Gale and his crews have mavericked their share of Chipped Moon cattle for you."

Gale was Stennet's foreman, lounging indolently against the doorframe, his short legs and long, heavy-shouldered torso giving him the top heavy look of a sullen, blond ape. His primitive, square-boned face flushed darkly beneath his cropped hair as Karl Venth shouted, and he pushed away from the door, spinning George Karrick aside with a thrust of one meaty shoulder, to reach Karl and swing him around by the arm.

"If you want to talk like that, let's go outside where I can answer it right," Gale told him.

"I'm not goin' out till we're through here!" Karl spat at him, trying to tear loose.

"Yes, you are," Gale said, catching the front of his shirt and pushing him off-balance to bull him backward toward the door.

THE brushmen gave way before the shoving force. But Karl's father swung in behind Gale suddenly, giving him a short, vicious punch in the kidneys. Gale grunted sickly, stiffening up. Karl regained his balance, coming back at Gale. Harry Venth snaked one foot behind Gale's leg. Karl slugged the Stennet foreman in the face. It was perfect teamwork. Gale was carried backward by the blow, tripping over Harry Venth's boot, to fall heavily to the floor.

The room was shaken with the uproar of voices now, and the violent shifting of bodies. David Stennet was coming from behind the table, and Chipped Moon hands were bursting in the doors. Gale rolled over to his hands and knees, shaking his cropped head dazedly, and started coming up off the floor at Karl.

Harry Venth moved across to the side of

his son, blocking the sight of him off from most of the men in the room. But Reid had seen Karl Venth's hand dropping gunward just before his father stepped to hide it.

"Karl!" shouted Reid, jumping for him. "You can't! Gale ain't armed—"

Reid saw Harry Venth wheel toward him, glittering eyes widening in some surprise. But Karl was still intent on Gale, with that gun flashing free. Harry Venth tried to lunge in front of Reid and block him. But Reid tilted one shoulder into the man and caromed him away into Karl, catching at his elbow before his gun was raised high enough to fire, and swinging him around violently.

At the same time, Lee Gale came up off the floor, striking Karl from behind with a vicious, chopping blow against the base of his neck.

Karl went limp against Reid and slid down his body. At the same time, a blow on the head stunned Reid, sending him down to his knees along with Karl's limp body. Room spinning about him, the sounds roaring in his head like a gigantic surf, he twisted off on one hand to stare up into Harry Venth's vicious face. The man had clubbed him from behind with a gun and was raising it to strike again.

Then it was Gale's body, coming right on over both Karl and Reid, to block the blow, and sink his free fist deep into Harry Venth's skinny middle. The older man doubled over with a hollow gasp, and fell off to the side, his face yellow with sickness. Gale's lips bared his teeth in a savage, grinning snarl.

"Now, Reid, let's clean up the pasture."

The whole room was a shoutnig, shuddering uproar now, and Reid found himself the center of it. Slugging, kicking, butting, Gale had become the focal point of battle. As Reid rose groggily to his feet, Noah Lattimer came charging in over him at the Stennet foreman.

Reid tried to twist out of the way, but Noah struck him solidly, knocking Reid back into Gale. Noah's bony face was taut with rage as he slugged at Reid, trying to get him out of the way. Desperately, Reid caught his arm, trying to block the vicious blows.

"Noah!" he gasped. "I can't fight with you. Cut it out! There's no reason for this."

"The hell there ain't!" snarled Noah, jerking violently to get free. "I saw you hold Karl so Gale could hit him that way!"

## CHAPTER III

### *Little Man—Big Man*

ON THE last word, Noah Lattimer was swinging into Reid with one of his bony fists. It knocked the wind from Reid and he doubled over into the man, grappling him. Lattimer brought a knee up at his face, and Reid straightened violently, blocking it with a knee of his own, striking back with nothing but an instinct of self-preservation.

One of his blows connected, knocking the gaunt, bony man back into Gordon Walker. The owner of the Double X had lost his affected foppery and reverted to the violent savagery of his earlier days in the brush. His mauve fustian was half torn off his back. There was a wild-eyed look on his handsome face as he caught Lattimer, spinning him around and sinking a vicious blow into his belly that doubled him over and sent him staggering across the room until he hit the wall and slid down to the floor.

At the same time, Reid found Gale knocked back into him by the combined attack of Obed Phillips and George Karrick. He whirled aside to keep from being knocked off his feet by Gale's body. Gale stumbled backward past him, face streaming blood, and Reid found himself in the path of both George Karrick and Obed Phillips.

The red-headed man lunged across his flank, knocking him aside with a sweeping blow of one arm. This put him right before Obed Phillips. The old man was wild-eyed, bawling like a steer in a tornado, his knobby old hands beating against Reid with bony devastation.

A gnarled fist smashed his mouth. Reid's

hands swung wildly to catch at something to save himself from falling. One of his hands, half-fisted, cracked bone. He got a foot behind him and stopped from going down. He saw the hand was bloody. Then he saw Obed Phillips, reeling backward, blood streaming down over his eyes. The man sagged against the wall and remained there, pawing at his eyes and making pitiful sounds.

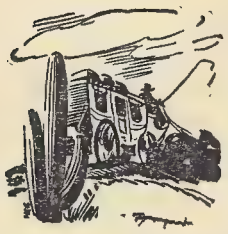
Another body lunged past Reid, staggering, and fell over someone lying on the floor, no fight. Half a dozen of the Chipped Moon crew were spread out across the room, and more kept coming through the doors. Caskie stood over against the wall, her face white.

"You fools," she kept repeating, "you fools, you fools!"

Irl Allison got to his feet. He looked at David Stennet, standing by the desk, and at Bomar, over near the door. Finally his eyes reached Reid. A terrible revulsion darkened them.

Reid held out a hand. "Irl—"

# What's in a Name?



**THE odd names of some cities and towns in our country were dubbed on the places for even odder reasons. For example, Novi, Michigan, would have been called something else if it hadn't been "Stop No. VI" for the horses, stages and wagons that rested here regularly while traveling from Detroit to Lansing. Little by little a community grew up around the small depot. And while this was going on the period got lost, and "NO. VI" emerged as just "NOVI."**

**A town in Texas would assuredly have been called something else if two of the first settlers (a husband and wife) hadn't spent most of their time in continuous bickering. This ultimately resulted in plans for a separation and the dividing up of their heretofore mutual property. Both wanted the house, and the rest of the populace helped argue out whether it should be "his'n" or "her'n." When the latter won out, the town in its turn became known as "her'n" too. Before long the spelling was changed to read "Herne."**

**But some folks who lived out in the western part of Iowa didn't want their community to have a "happenstance" name. So they compiled a long list of potentials which they sent to their postmaster together with the question, "Which one do you like?"**

**"None," he replied, "Pick one that will stick."**

**And that's how Wax, Iowa, got its name!**

***—Bess Ritter***

going to hands and knees. It was Allison. He remained there on his hands and knees, gasping, a sick, drained look to his face. Reid realized it was the last movement in the room. He became aware of Lee Gale standing behind him a little, sweat drenching his shirt, his great chest heaving. Karl and Harry Venth sprawled at his feet, and Noah Lattimer huddled against the wall back of him.

"I guess that's it," Gale panted, with an ugly grin. "The pasture's clean."

Dazedly, Reid realized the man was right. What brushmen remained on their feet were huddled defensively in one corner, offering

The man turned his back and walked toward the door. One by one the other brushmen followed. Most of them would not even look at Reid. A couple had to pick Karl Venth up and carry him; he was still out cold.

Reid stumbled over to Caskie.

"I've got to go, too," he mumbled. "I've got to see Irl."

The Stennet riders made way for him as he passed through the door. The brushmen were mounting. They had finally revived Karl, and were helping him onto his horse.

"Irl," Reid called, "I've got to talk with you."

ALLISON did not even look at Reid this time. He wheeled his horse from the rack and put it into a gallop off over the flats. Pain still pinching his face, Karl Venth wheeled his animal away from the rack, looking down at Reid.

"Maybe Irl don't want to see you any more," he said. "I do, Reid. This ain't finished yet, but by heaven, I'm going to finish it, the next time I see you!"

He spun his animal away and galloped after the others. There were voices from within the house, now. Reid was dully aware of Gordon Walker bidding good night to the Stennets. The man walked across the flagstone porch, smoothing out his lustrous black hair. He halted by the racks, pulling his rent coat together with a rueful smile.

"Haven't had a shindig like that in years. Didn't remember it could be so much fun." He dropped the torn edges, looking up at Reid. "Your friends disown you?"

Reid's lips were thin. "I guess it looked pretty bad."

"Think there'll really be trouble?" asked Walker.

Reid turned on the man, suddenly angry. "You didn't go to war, did you, Walker?"

The man's handsome face darkened. "Let's not descend to personalities."

"How can you talk about trouble?" Reid told him. "If this thing ain't settled, you'll find out what it really is."

The twist of Walker's mouth suddenly made his face ugly. "Don't start threatenin' again, Reid. If you didn't find out which side your bread is buttered on tonight, you're a bigger fool than I thought."

"Now, now, we are not goin' to start the war all over again, are we?" asked Bomar Stennet, from the door. He came out, chuckling heartily, and put a hand on Reid's shoulder, smiling at Walker. "Let's show a little kindness to the man who saved the day for us, Walker."

"You do the honors, Bomar," Walker answered cynically. "I've got to go home and get this coat mended."

He took the reins off the hitch-rack and swung up to his glossy, fretting copperbottom, turning her to gallop off in a flourish. Bomar squeezed Reid's arm.

"Don't take him too seriously, son. Rich life's gone to his head. Why don't you stay to supper? It would be a little dangerous for you to go out there right now."

Reid turned to him. "But I didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't mean to stand up for the big interests, but the way the fight went, it sure looked like you were on our side. Harry Venth was standin' in front of his son. I don't think any of the brushmen saw Karl go for his gun. They didn't know you jumped in to save Gale's life."

Reid shoulders dropped, and he followed Bomar into the dining room, where Caskie and her father were talking tensely beside the door. "I've invited the boy to supper," Bomar said.

For just a moment hostility tightened David Stennet's face, then that broke before indecision and finally he forced a smile.

"Of course," he said. "After puttin' up that kind of fight for us, we'd be glad to have you."

"But I didn't mean to fight for—"

"Yes, yes." Bomar's hearty chuckle broke in on Reid's word, and he caught the young man's arm. "If you'll just sit down at this end, boy, we'll ring the dinner-bell."

Stennet had been working too hard at building his empire to pay much attention to refining his own mode of living, so without the softening influence of a wife, his home ranch showed little improvement over the barren simplicity with which he had started.

Upon Caskie's insistence some furniture had been shipped in from the East. Instead of the usual shutters, the windows had been glassed in and were draped with heavy wine damask, matched by an Aubusson rug that looked strangely incongruous against the puncheon flooring.

AFTER cleaning up the wreckage of battle, Gale and the hands had left, and now only Reid and the three Stennets were in the dining room. On the table was the inevitable decanter of Bomar's peach brandy, from which he poured a drink. David Stennet seated himself sourly at the head of the table, frowning at the plate before him.

"I can't understand what those fools keep fightin' for. Can't they see the day of the little man is over? They can't drive north themselves. They don't have a big enough herd to make it pay. All they do is sell their gather to some bigger operator at half price anyway."

"They won't always have to sell at cut-throat prices," Reid said. "Trail drivin's still a new thing. When they get it goin' right it'll be possible to drive the cattle of a dozen brands north in one herd. They're already usin' a road brand on the Chisholm."

"I wouldn't handle any of Allison's cattle," Stennet growled. "And he wouldn't trust me to take 'em anyway."

"That's just it," Reid maintained. "Until we reach the point of trustin' each other, we'll never get anywhere. There will always be little men and big men. Until they can work together—"

"The cattleman's association again?" asked David, wearily.

"Yes," Reid told him defiantly. "The cattleman's association again."

"I'm tired of hearing about it," David told him.

"Now, now, Dave," Bomar placated. "There's nothin' new in the association idea. Our congress is an association, in a sense. We have people we trust representin' us to make the laws, for our benefit and protection. The cattle business is gettin' too big for this loose-jointed system of free open range and cattle barons. It's got to have some sort of control."

David Stennet shook his head. "I've fought and bled to build my ranch and I'm not goin' to back an organization that will allow some prairie lawyer like Irl Allison to vote me out of business."

"Wasn't you little when you started?" Reid asked.

David Stennet struck the table. "No, damn it, no!"

"Father," Caskie pouted, "you can't be that blind. You didn't even own as many cattle as Irl Allison does now when you started."

"Then I wasn't as weak as Allison or I couldn't have got big," Stennet said.

Bomar smiled indulgently. "That's hardly the point. Oo you completely refuse to see the truth in Reid's idea?"

David wheeled toward him angrily. "Are you takin' the side of the little men now, Bomar? Maybe you'd rather drop the maverick law from your platform."

"I'm just tryin' to see both viewpoints." Bomar made an oratorical gesture, his voice rolling dramatically. "America has been founded upon the ideal of rugged individualism, of small businessmen. You can't be so blind as to believe they have no right to make a livin' their own way."

"Not when that way is rustlin'," snapped Dave Stennet.

Reid half-rose in an anger of his own. "But they're not rustlers. Mavericking' ain't rustlin'!"

"I'm goin' to make it rustlin'," answered Caskie's father in a loud, shouting voice, coming to his feet. "And when it is, I'm goin' to run every mavericker out of this country."

"Please, Dad!" Caskie pleaded.

Reid was on his feet too, now. "When you say a law to outlaw mavericking', then all you mean is a law to outlaw the little man?"

"If I could pass that, I would!" Stennet yelled.

"I hoped there was some way you could be reached, but I see now you're plumb blind," Reid said in a trembling voice. "My people were from the brush, Stennet. I can't eat the food of a man who would drive their kind completely off the face of the earth!"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Mavericking*

PALE and shaken with his rage, Mayne Reid turned to go out and get his horse. Caskie followed him and caught him beside the animal. She was almost crying.

"Why did you have to bring that up?" she asked him. "You know how it always affects Dad."

"I didn't bring it up," Reid said. "It's been between us all the time."

"You're as blind as he is," she said. "Can't you understand his viewpoint at all? This mavericking threatens his very existence. If the brushmen go on taking advantage of the fact that an unbranded cow belongs to whoever ropes it, the big ranchers will be wiped out."

"But there are two viewpoints, Caskie, and the association is the only thing that will bring 'em together. If I seem to defend the little men it's only because I'm one of 'em myself. You have no idea how hard it is to keep in the middle of this thing. When I run up against your father's blind—"

"And what about when you run up against Irl Allison's rustling?" she asked.

"Irl Allison never rustled a cow in his life."

"He mavericked. I saw him on our land last week."

"Are you gettin' as blind as your father? What Allison was doin' was in good faith. Maverickin' and rustlin' are two different things."

"I don't see that," she said. "They're my father's cows, aren't they, whether they're branded or not?"

"How can you be sure?" he asked.

"They're on our land, aren't they?"

"And is this horse yours just because it's on your land?" he said.

Her face reddened, and she could hardly speak. "You called father blind. I think it's you who can't see."

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But maybe I can see now. I said I'd never eat the food of a man who'd drive my people off the face of the earth. Maybe I can't marry his daughter, either."

Without another word he rode away. . . .

A restless, meager sleep left Mayne Reid groggy and depressed the next morning. He had his frugal breakfast of sidemeat, saleratus biscuits and coffee, and saddled up to work cattle. He had been trying to build a herd by mavericking himself, though he scrupulously avoided land claimed by any of the big operators. There was a lot of open range south of his homestead, towad the Rio Grande, and he lined out in this direction with his blue-tick roan, leading a trio of neck oxen.

First he picked up a pair of wild brush steers that he had roped and tied to a coma tree two days before, branding them and leaving them to sulk out some of their meanness. One of them was hungry and thirsty enough so that it allowed itself to be yoked up with a tame ox. Reid then let them go, for though the wild one might fight, and it could well take several days or even a week, the patient, inexorable tame ox would eventually lead the wild steer back to Reid's pastures.

The second wild one was still too ornery to handle, so Reid left it there and went on. He picked up a pair of heifers he had branded and tied farther on, and sent these packing with their oxen. Then he was free to hunt up some new stuff for tying and branding.

He lined out for half an hour down a dim game trail till he found some thick whitebrush. He started through this, seeking to flush some of the wild ones. He had staked out this thicket the day before, and found it ripe for working. He was not far within the fringe when the first rattling sound came off to his right.

The horse tossed its head nervously and he reined in, looking in the direction of the sound, trying to see cattle sign on the ground. The mount was so nervous now that it was turning beneath him and he pulled his reins in tighter, trying to wheel it back. At this moment the shot came, smashing all other sound from his head.

THE horse screamed in shocked surprise and bolted from beneath him. Its sudden jump pitched his body backward. Vainly he trid to jerk himself back into balance but the blue-tick wheeled at a sharp turn in the trail and it seemed as if all the mesquite in the world came up to claw him off. He hit the ground heavily, trying to roll off the force of the fall on his shoulder. He came to a stop on his back, deep in whitebrush.

He lay there moveless, blood from his cut face mingling with the sweat, to smear his lips with a grimy taste. For a moment longer, he could hear his horse crashing

distantly through the brush, then even that stopped.

There was no wind to rattle the brush and the heat seemed to press slowly, solidly down upon him until he felt suffocated. Still he did not move, lying there flat on his back, waiting for the sounds he knew would have to come, sooner or later. That bushwhacker had been close enough to spit on him and Reid knew that he would either come looking or move away. It was incredible to him that the man had missed at such a distance.

With painful slowness now, he moved his right hand down until it touched the butt of his gun. Beyond this he did not move, afraid the slightest motion would betray him.

Finally it came. That smallest rustling. That sibilant, barely audible crushing of fallen underbrush beneath the pressure of a foot. It was followed by more sound, assuming direction for his keen, brush-trained ear, until he realized the man was moving away from him. Then he rolled over, got to his feet and began the stalk.

He did not know how far he followed the man through the thickets. His clothes were drenched in sweat, his body jumping with tension. The trail led southward perhaps a quarter of a mile. He tried to push it, but he could never catch sight of the man. Then from ahead, he heard the grunt of a horse and a sudden heavy burst of crashing brush.

He ran hard in the direction of the sound but all he had was a last, helpless sight of a rider he could not recognize crashing off into the thickets. The fellow disappeared so swiftly Reid was not even given a chance for a shot.

He stood there with the gun dropped at his side, staring at it, a sick, drained feeling sweeping in suddenly in reaction to the last half-hour of savage tension. Still standing that way, the vague scent of something burning reached him. He turned in a full circle, sniffing, and finally moved off toward the north.

The odor became stronger. Again the tension of maintained stealth filled his movements. It was another space of stalking through the brush, ears attuned to every small sound, eyes searching for some unnatural sign. Presently he came upon a game trail which broadened out into an opening in the brush. Here a small fire with running-irons lying in it smoldered not far from a hastily thrown up brush corral, containing half a dozen steers. There was another animal lying on its side by the fire, hog-tied.

Reid remained for a long time hidden within the brush, trying to make this out. The animal in the open had not yet been worked over. The Chipped Moon brand was on its side. Without revealing himself, he tried to make out the brands on the cattle within the corral, but the occotillo around the pen was so thick it obscured them.

Finally, with no other sign of presence in the brush, he risked moving into the open. He reached the corral, seeing for the first time the brands on the cattle here. There were two that had not been worked over, still bearing the Chipped Moon, but the other four showed the freshly burned imprint of the Double Sickle. His own brand!

BEFORE he had time for the full implications of this to reach him, he heard a subdued crash in the thickets behind him. He turned the other way to cross the clearing for the safety of the brush on the other side. Before he reached it, there was another pop of brush from here. Lee Gale burst into the open, leading Reid's own blue-tick roan. The man pulled up sharply, his eyes flickering from Reid's gun to the cattle lying on the ground.

"Well," he said. "Horse get away from you while you were blottin' brands?"

"I wasn't blottin' any brands," Reid said.

"Then who was?" Gale asked.

Reid's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Maybe you'd know more about that than I would."

Gale spat contemptuously. "Yeah, sure. I came out here with Mr. Stennet and his brother to blot them brands. We do it every day."

"Stennet?" Reid said, in surprise.

The sarcasm fled from Gale's stolid, primitive face. "That's right. Bomar convinced his brother they should come out and try to patch it up with Allison. We found your horse running the thickets and smelled that

smoke. There's been so much trouble through here we broke up to come in from both sides. That's why you won't get a chance to use your gun. Mr. Dave is behind you now and your brisket is dead in the way of his dewey."

Slowly, Reid turned until he could see David Stennet standing on the other side of the glade with a gun in his hand.

"Drop your gun, Reid," he said. Then he lifted his head a little. "All right, Bomar. Bring the horses in. We've found the fire. It looks like Reid is our rustler."

Reid had dropped his gun but he could not help taking a step forward. "Hold up, Stennet. This ain't my camp!"

"You disappoint me," David Stennet said coldly. "Only a fool would try to deny such plain evidence. Hot runnin' irons, one of my steers hog-tied on the ground, four more in the corral with your Double Sickle."

A grin spread sardonically across Lee Gale's face. "That Sickle shape sure covers the quarter moon of our brand perfect."

At this moment, Bomar came rattling through the thickets leading David Stennet's handsome black. He halted beside his brother, taking in the scene with one quick glance. Then he looked down at David.

"Are there any holes at all?"

"Not a flaw," David answered thinly. "Everything makes Reid our rustler."

Reid started to say something, then settled back, seeing the adamant expression in David Stennet's face. He looked helplessly at Bomar. The man frowned at him, spreading his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"I wish I could do somethin', son. Here we were on our way out to try and patch it up with Irl Allison. Why did you have to pull this?"

Reid stared at him, a bleak look emptying his face of any other expression. Then he turned to mount his horse. He knew he would have no chance if they got him into town now. Feeling against the rustlers was too high, and the evidence against him too damning. He would have to take this last chance then.

David Stennet had stepped out to pick Reid's gun off the ground, his own gun still in his hand. Gale dropped the reins of the roan into Reid's hand. Reid pulled the horse's head part way around so that Gale would be between him and Stennet when he swung on.

Gale saw this and tried to pull out of the way, going for his own gun in the last instant. But Reid was already swinging up, his left leg slapping against the leather. His seat hit the cantle and he put both spurs into the animal's flank. The roan wheeled and bolted, smashing directly into Gale's horse. This knocked Gale's animal back. Gale had his gun out, but it pitched him off the saddle down onto David Stennet.

Reid wheeled his animal directly into the brush. He had a last glimpse of David Stennet rolling from beneath Gale's body and taking a shot at him. The bullet clattered through brush off to his right, then they were out of sight behind him.

## CHAPTER V

### *In the Brush*

THE ROAN galloped at a wild, headlong pace, filled with the frenzy of the chase. Reid kept dodging and ducking, eyes wide open, a hundred times missing by a hair having his face clawed to ribbons by *junco,* or his head knocked off by a post-oak branch. Bobbing, swaying, ducking-jacket ripped and torn, he raced on, his roan's hoofs drumming under him.

Then suddenly the roan stumbled, almost pitching him over its head. Reid gave a spasmodic lurch upward that took him back into the saddle just in time. The roan kept on going, at an uneven trot, limping badly on its right forefoot.

It was the sound of David Stennet's voice shouting far behind that made Reid realize he could not outrun them with a lame horse. He reined the roan in, and dropping off, quirted it on the flank. Freed of his weight, the animal could run fairly well, and went

crashing off into the thicket. Then Reid wheeled and dived into the brush at the right of the trail.

He was crouched there when the three riders crashed by, hot on the trail of his roan, which was making its rattling, popping passage through the brush ahead. When they disappeared, he wheeled and ran. It was a wild, stumbling flight, in his high-heeled boots, tripping on roots, floundering through decayed brush that had fallen and piled up a foot deep through the centuries. He did not know how many times he went down. He headed southward, toward Allison's, hoping the man would at least give him a horse, knowing he was the only brushman left who might retain some pity.

Running as long as he could, dropping to a stumbling walk when he could no longer run, falling to the ground when his body refused to go farther, rising up once more to run again after a short, gasping rest, he made his nightmarish way toward the river. He was blind with exhaustion when he finally weaved into the clearing around Allison's shack. Halfway to the house, he stumbled in a pothole and fell to his knees. He went down onto his hands, unable to rise.

Then the door opened, and Reid raised his glazed eyes, seeing now that two horses stood before the shack—Obed Phillips' weedy dun and the gaunted claybank Karl Venth rode. And Irl Allison was coming out with an empty bucket in one hand.

Reid called Allison's name. He did not recognize his own voice. Allison put down the bucket; started walking towards him. Reid could see the man's suspicion and puzzled reluctance struggling with his instinctive humanity. Reid got heavily to his feet.

"Irl," he said, "Stennet's on my trail. He thinks I've rustled some cattle." His voice must have brought Karl Venth and Phillips to the door.

"Don't let him in, Irl," Karl said. "He'll suck us all in the bog."

Allison's head turned to them and then back to Reid. "Rustled some cattle?" he said. "What made Stennet think that?"

"I walked in on some kind of trap," said Reid. "Somebody'd rustled half a dozen Stennet steers and slapped my brand on 'em. Then they took a shot at me to make me follow 'em to the camp. I don't know how they timed it, but Stennet came in while I was there."

Karl Venth's laugh was ugly and humorless. "I guess that's the same story you told Stennet. No wonder he didn't believe you."

"Now wait a minute," Allison told them. "I can't believe Reid would do a thing like this."

"You saw him jump me there in Stennet's house," Karl said.

"You'd better not have anything to do with this, Allison," Obed said. "If Stennet finds him here, you're as liable to get run in as him."

"We can't turn him away," Allison told them. "He's too played out to walk across this clearing."

"All I ask is a horse, Irl," Reid said. "I don't want to get you in trouble."

"How far are they behind you?" Allison asked.

"I think I shook 'em quite a ways back," Reid said. "I gave 'em a blind trail to the west, then walked the river for an hour this way. I don't even think they'll come here lookin' for me, knowin' how you feel."

ALLISON studied his face for a long space.

"You'd better come in and put somethin' in your belly," he said at last. "Then we'll talk about gettin' a horse."

"You're a damn fool, Allison!" Karl Venth said viciously. "And if he stays, I go."

"I can't turn him away, Karl," Allison told him.

For a moment nobody spoke. Out by the corral a hen cackled. Then Karl turned, spat toward Reid and walked over to his claybank, swinging up with a vicious lash of his leg and reining the animal brutally around to spur it into a headlong gallop out into the brush.

Allison turned to go inside, indicating that Reid should follow. Obed Phillips stepped back to let them through. Allison indicated a chair at the plank table. The three men had evidently been eating, for the beans Allison dished up were still warm and the coffee needed no heating. The food put new life

into Reid. He was conscious of Phillips' eyes on him while he ate, and finally old Obed stirred. He had remained by the door.

"Irl," he said, "you and I've been pardners a long time but I can't stay here with this. I'm goin' down to Karrick's place. I'll be back tomorrer."

Allison had been standing by the table. He held out his hand, starting to say Phillips' name, but the old man had already turned to go out. Reid stopped eating, staring dully at his half-empty plate. Then he looked up at the deep lines etched into Allison's face. The chair creaked beneath him as he pushed it back and got unsteadily to his feet.

"I reckon I've caused you enough touble," he said. "I should have known better than to come here in the first place. I'll go out and tell Obed I'm leavin'. I know what it is to lose your friends."

Before he could reach the door, however, Phillips came back in, shutting the door hard and standing with his back flat against it. Light from the oil lamp made a wide-eyed, parchment mask on his face.

"There's something going on outside," he said. "I heard the brush pop on the west side of the cabin as I went out, then I heard a horse nicker to the east when I got to the corral. I think it's Stennet. I think they're surroundin' the place."

Allison whirled to look at Reid. Then he walked across the room to pull an old Thuers Conversion off the shelf and hand it over.

"If you want to chance it, maybe you can make it into the brush before they see you," he said. "I've got a couple of half-broke broomtails in that corral down in the gully. I hold 'em there to keep them away from my gentled animals."

"Thanks, Irl," Reid said huskily.

He walked to the back door. The corral was only a few feet from this. It had originally been built by Mexicans, and had an adobe fence rather than one of poles. He raked the thickets with a glance, saw nothing, ran doubled-over to the adobe wall. He moved down this in a crouch.

Now the rattle of brush came from beyond the wall. It's direction was the same as his. Could that mean they had not yet completely surrounded the place and were still moving into position?

He had to chance it. He reached the end of the wall. From here to the first mesquite was another few feet. If they were still moving into position, they wouldn't want to be seen. That meant they could be too far back in the brush to see him.

He dropped behind the mesquite, the sweat dripping off him. Then he began to make his way into the thicker brush. That crackling was still off to his left. He broke into a run, gaining on it, passing it, dropping into the gully. Flat against the bank, he heard a man creeping across the line he had just cut. Then the sound of another man, meeting him, and Lee Gale's voice.

"We've got the place cut off now. Mr. Dave ought to call anytime."

REID turned and made his way through the sandy wash. The pen was a few hundred yards down. Here he found a pinto and a buckskin. He chose the buckskin for its bottom. It might have kicked up more fuss if he'd tried to throw a kak on. But all he found was a strip of rawhide slung on one of the poles, which he knotted into a hackamore around its jaw, leading it out.

It started humping and rearing. He waited for his chance, and when the fretting bronc wheeled in against him, swung aboard. It started to buck. He gave it the spurs. It broke into a run down the wash, sand muffling its passage. At the same time, David Stennet's voice rose from the hot, moveless air behind.

"Open the door, Allison, and let Reid come out alone. We know he's in there. Don't try to protect him and you won't get hurt."

Reid spent a half-hour heading for Comanche Corrals, out in a little-known section of brush to the east. Then he had to pull up, for the bronc was beginning to blow in this heat, under the pace he had set.

It was then that his mind began to work. How had Stennet known he was at Allison's? They couldn't have trailed him there that quick, not even with a lucky break. It was almost as if someone had told them. Karl Venth had been the only one who knew.

Then the rest of it struck him. Almost automatically his mind began to pick up the little pieces. It had been Karl and Harry Venth who had first prodded him there with Allison. It had been Karl who had first pulled his gun in the Stennet house. Could it have been Karl who told the Stennets?

In grim anger, Reid wheeled his bronc, heading back southwest. A man learned the value of staking out in working cattle. He might have to spend days staking out a section of brush, hidden within a thicket, with the sweat and the heat and the flies. But sooner or later, the cattle came, and he found out what he wanted.

Reid reached the Venths' place near sundown. It was set deep in the river brush of Webb County, so close to the Rio Grande that the evening breeze stank of the rotten bottom mud. Reid ditched his bronc deep in the brush.

The hard ride had wiped some of the devil from the green animal, and the rawhide he had used as a hackamore was long enough for a neck rope. It was a half-chance the animal would not tear loose.

He approached the house downwind so the animals in the pole-and-adobe corral out back wouldn't catch his scent and start nickering. The house was nothing but a pair of rooms with a covered breezeway running between them. The windows had been glassed in by a row of whisky bottles which let the light out in yellow diffusion.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Tie-up*

REID found a thick patch of whitebrush and settled down. He had no idea how long it would take. It was just as good as hiding out at Comanche Corrals, and might lead to something more.

Some time in the evening a tall, slouched figure appeared in the breezeway, silhouetted in a light from an open door. The man stood there scratching under his red underwear, and then shot a stream of tobacco juice at one of the chickens roosting against the wall.

"Gettin' late, Karl," he said. "If they got Reid, Gale should have brought word by now."

Karl's voice came muffled from within. "Maybe Gale had to go back to the Chipped Moon with 'em before he could get away. Come back in and have another hand. I hate to let a winnin' streak get cold."

Harry Venth went back in. But Reid felt a new intensity enter his vigil. Lee Gale? It was beginning to tie up.

He did not know how much later it was when the man came. There was the pop of brush, the horses in the corral began nickering, a rider broke brush into the clearing. That light fanned out from the breezeway again, illuminating the short-legged, long-bodied form, as he swung off, catching whitely in his cropped blond hair.

"Light and have a drink, Gale," Karl said, from the door. "How'd it go?"

"Reid wasn't at Allison's," Gale told them angrily. "What kind of a blind lead did you give us?"

"He couldn't have got out by the time I reached you!" Karl said excitedly. "He was so played out his navel was dragging the ground."

"Well, he wasn't there. You just caused more trouble than you're worth. Allison and Phillips put up a fight—"

"Maybe they did that to give Reid a chance to get away," Karl told him.

"I don't care why they did it. Obed Phillips raised so much hell in the fight I had to crack him with my gun butt. The old fool died, and now Stennet's on my neck. I'll be lucky if he keeps me on. This whole idea of yours has boomeranged."

"I don't see how," Harry Venth said, joining his son in the breezeway. "Reid is their rustler now, ain't he?"

"He sure is," laughed Karl. "Fell right into that trap. You'd have laughed the way he follered me through that brush, creepin' along quiet as an Indian, thinkin' he was so smart. I led him right up to the Chipped Moon cattle in the corral."

"He was there when we showed up, all right," Gale said.

"How did you time it so close?" Harry asked. "You couldn't have hit it better carryin' a watch."

The admiration in his voice sounded deliberately affected, to Reid, but it mollified Gale somewhat. "I told you I'd hold up my end," the Stennet foreman said expansively. "Bomar had been poundin' away at David about how they ought to patch things up with Allison. I suggested we could reach Allison about noon, when he come back to his shack for lunch. Dave sort of held back, but you know how Bomar can talk."

"Wish I was a politician," Harry Venth chuckled.

"You don't want to laugh at Bomar," Gale said. "He's no fool. As long as he's still pulling for Reid, it's goin' to be dangerous. If he smelled somethin' phony, he wouldn't stop till he had the United States Senate out here investigatin'."

"At least we was right about where Reid would be," said Karl. "He'd staked out that whitebrush thicket the day before. I been watchin' him, and I know how he works. He was right on the spot for our little show."

"Quit pattin' yourself on the back," Harry Venth told his son. "Reid's still loose, ain't he?"

"They'll get him," Gale muttered. "Gordon Walker's joined his men to the Stennet crew, and they're combin' the brush. That's why I can't waste any time here. Have you got the money?"

HARRY VENTH jerked his head toward the inside, and they disappeared down the breezeway. Reid darted from his cover, across the open, flattening against a wall. Through the bottle window, now, he could hear the scrape of a chair, the rustle of feet. Then Harry Venth's voice.

"Here's the cash. Alvarez paid us in American money, the way you wanted, but we had to take a discount. He met us about ten miles south of the river, and we turned the cattle over to him. Even he's startin' to kick about this tally book. It takes too much time to tally off each cow, Gale. You can't set in one spot that long with a wet herd. Anybody's bound to ride up."

"You'd think we was runnin' a legitimate business," complained Karl. "Even markin' down the brand on each one. What if somebody gets hold of that tally book? There's a record of every cow we rustled in there. Add it up with a few other things and we'd be in hot water."

"The man we work for don't trust me any more than I trust you," Gale said cynically. "This way he can keep a cross-check on every dollar that passes through our hands. I've got to meet him at the old Sewell house tomorrer noon. He'll give us our cut of this then."

"I still don't like it," Venth muttered.

"He's kept you in clover so far, hasn't he? You've run ten times as many cattle as you ever did before. We wouldn't be able to operate on this scale without his brains and his protection. Reid's proved that. A man workin' alone hasn't got a chance. I'll get in touch with you by Sunday and tell you where to pick up your next bunch. *Adios.*"

Reid had an impulse to run for cover, but Gale got out too swiftly. Reid saw the edge of light fanning out from the breezeway before he was a foot away from the wall. He shoved himself back tight against it. There was the murmur of voices, more good-bys, the creak of saddle leather. Then Gale appeared past the corner of the house, lining out into the brush. He had disappeared when Harry Venth's voice came.

"I'm going to water them nags before I go to bed."

Reid stiffened against the logs. There was the shuffle of boots against hard adobe. The tall, slouched figure appeared at the corner, turned down the side of the shack. Light from the bottle window was between Reid and Harry Venth. It must have blinded the man to Reid, straightened there against the wall in the darkness behind the window. The elder Venth came on, head down, muttering to himself. Reid's hand slid to the butt of that Thuers in his belt.

Harry walked into the light. It threw one half of his face in shadow, deepened the network of furrows on the other. He left the light. He was within a foot of Reid. Suddenly his head snapped up, eyes blinking in

a last attempt to adjust themselves to this new darkness and identify the shape against the wall. Reid slid his gun out and lunged.

"Karl—"

The single word was cut off by the sound of Harry's own scream of pain. He had thrown his arm up to block the blow, and Reid's gun had struck that. The man went to the ground in a heap, face twisted with the agony of a smashed arm.

The younger Venth must have still been at the front of the house, for Reid heard the sudden drum of his boots on that hard earth, and hardly had time to wheel and lift his gun before Karl burst into view at the corner. He had his gun out, too. Reid had stepped into the diffused light from the window to strike the elder Venth, and the two men saw each other at the same time.

THE GUNS made a great smashing sound in the night. Karl had not stopped running when he shot, and that must have thrown him off. Reid saw the man run on two more steps after the shots, then stumble on his third and go down. Then Reid saw the strip of white wood in the wall, a foot from his shoulder, where Karl's bullet had torn bark off in its oblique passage.

He walked over to the man. Karl lay flat on his stomach, the gun still gripped in one hand. A bullet-hole in the back of his ducking jacket just beneath his left shoulder blade was beginning to fill with blood. Reid turned back to see Harry Venth up on his good elbow, staring his way with half-parted lips, face taut with the strain of the position.

"He's dead," Reid said heavily.

An intense hatred settled into Harry Venth's face. His lips moved in a terrible, soundless curse. Then a rattle of brush wheeled Reid. Gale's voice came from a thicket.

"Venth! Did you hear that shot? Did it come from here?"

Reid realized the man had not ridden in far enough to see this scene. He lifted his gun till it bore on Harry Venth's head.

"Make a sound, and I'll kill you, I swear!" he said, in a tense undertone. Then he raised his voice in an imitation of Harry's acerbic snarl. "Hell, no, Gale. Probably one of your crew shooting at jack rabbits. There'll be a lot of jumpy hands tonight."

There was a long moment of silence. Reid realized the sweat had broken out on his face. He gripped the gun so tight his hand ached. For a moment, he thought Harry meant to call out. Then there was a pop of brush, dying off into the night. Reid took a heavy, shaken breath. Looking at the pain in Harry's face, he felt an impulse to pity. Then he remembered Obed Phillips.

"I wish I could turn you in," he told the man. "But they wouldn't take my word for it now. I'm going to leave you afoot, Harry. I don't want you reaching Gale before I have a chance to clear this up. The best thing to do for that broken arm is head for Laredo. The closest doctor's there. If the law hasn't caught up with you by then, you can hop across the Border."

He took Venth's gun away. The man began cursing him then, a steady, unremitting stream of the vilest cursing Reid had ever heard. That kept up all the time he was turning the horses out of the corral and driving them ahead of him to where he had tied his own bronc. It was the best of the bunch, so after chasing the others out into the brush, he rode the bronc back and threw on one of the Venth's saddles.

Harry had dragged himself against the wall, still cursing, and sat there, following Reid with his epithets as Reid rode out.

It was over twenty miles from Venth's shack to the Stennet house. Reid never knew how he made it. Half a dozen times he was close enough to one of Walker's crew, or to a bunch of Stennet hands, to hear their voices. Twice he had to run for it, and only escaped by the barest margin. But all the time the idea was forming in his mind, driving him on to the Stennet place, a last chance that would save him or kill him.

His horse was blown, and it must have been near midnight when he reached the fringe of brush looking across the open to the sprawling Chipped Moon house. The windows in Caskie's bedroom were the only ones alight. But on the porch, the glowing tips of two cigars bobbd and dipped like lazy fireflies in the blackness. That would be David and Bomar Stennet, having their last

smoke before retiring. Even as Reid watched, a rider broke brush off to the east and came prancing his horse around to the front.

"Evenin', Walker." That was Bomar's hearty voice. "Been out scoutin' the thickets?"

"Hell, no," answered Gordon Walker, in his reckless, cavalier way. "I been in town, toastin' a quick capture of our rustler. My brush days are over."

"That's funny," said Bomar speculatively. "Gale just got back a little while ago. He spoke of seein' you down near Allison's."

There was a heavy pause. Walker's horse fretted beneath him. Then he spoke angrily.

"He's crazy. I was ten miles in the other direction."

"Well—" the burning tip of Bomar's cigar described an arc—"I suppose the brush is confusin' at this time of night."

"What are you drivin' at, Bomar?" demanded Walker.

"Nothing, Walker," answered Bomar, softly. "Don't be so jumpy. I admitted Gale probably made a mistake."

"Forget it, Walker," David Stennet said. "Step off and help us finish this peach brandy."

## CHAPTER VII

### *Last Chance*

LEAVING his horse, Reid slipped around the fringe of brush until he was out of sight of the front of the ranchhouse. There were no guards around the corrals or in the ranch yard. Here was the last place he would be expected to appear.

He reached a spot where a corner of the corrals almost touched the brush, and moved across to this, following its fence up to an outbuilding. In this way, using each bit of cover, he reached the house, and the windows of Caskie's bedroom. The shutters were open, the light streaming out over the sill onto the ground.

Coming up to one window he saw that she stood looking out, a heavy brocaded robe over her nightdress. He spoke her name softly, from where he stood against the shutter. She turned, face white, lips parted. He thought she meant to cry out, and swung one leg up over the sill, hand outstretched for her mouth.

But she had already closed her lips, stepping back away from him, a scornful expression in her eyes. He came on in over the sill, moving aside from the window, against the wall.

"I'm sorry, Caskie," he said. "I didn't know what to expect."

She was frowning as a shake of her head sent her abundant black curls to bobbing. Then she came up close, looking into his eyes, and spoke in a husky voice.

"Mayne Reid, did you really rustle those cattle?"

He started to speak hotly, then checked himself. When he finally spoke it was quietly and simply. "No, Caskie, I didn't."

She stared at him a moment longer, then she was in his arms, so tight against him he could feel her heart beating.

"I didn't want to believe them," she said. "But it looked so bad."

"It was made to look that way," he said. "Karl Venth took a shot at me. I trailed him to the cattle. That's what he wanted me to do. Gale was in on it. He was leading your father and Bomar out towards Allison's at just the right time for them to come across me with the rustled stuff. That's why I've come to you. Gale is goin' to meet the man behind all this at the old Sewell house tomorrow about noon. They'll have cash and a tally-book that'll prove they've been doin' the rustlin'. I want you to do a job of actin' for me."

"Acting?"

"Yes," he said. "It's a good three-hour ride from here to the Sewell house. About nine in the mornin' you start actin' nervous. Let your father or your uncle catch you tryin' to sneak a horse away. Then you let 'em think they forced the story out of you. You heard from Irl Allison that I was goin' to work another cut of rustled stock over at

the Sewell place. You were goin' to try and stop me."

Her eyes were dark in her pale face. "What if you don't time it right? What if Dad gets there before Gale does and finds you alone? He's up to the point of shooting you now, Mayne."

"It's my last chance," he said. "I've got to take it."

"Dad isn't the only one you've got to look out for," she said. "If he takes the whole crew, the brushmen will know about it, too. Irl Allison has sworn to get you for the death of Obed Phillips. He thinks you deliberately led Dad to his place in an attempt to throw the blame on them."

That made Reid sick inside. He let her go and stepped back, staring down into her face. Then he shook his head doggedly.

"I've still got to chance it. Will you do this for me, Caskie?"

She was in his arms again. "I'm afraid, Mayne—I'm afraid."

He tilted her chin up and pressed his lips against hers in a long, soft kiss. Finally he took his mouth away.

"Now are you afraid?"

Her eyes, turned up to his, were filled with tears, but they were shining, too. "Not as long as I can remember that," she said. . . .

THE OLD Sewell house was some twenty miles southeast of the Stennet place. It had been built when Texas was still a republic, by one of the earliest settlers in this region, who had come from Mississippi with definite ideas of architecture. The cattle empire he had tried to build had died with him long before the War, and all that remained was the great, gaunt house of adobe brick two stories high out there in the brush.

Thickets encroached from all sides, bindweed twining up the slender columns supporting the front galleries, mesquite, poking its irreverent head through gaping windows, devil's head thrusting its thorny malignance up through the warped flooring.

Reid reached the place long after midnight. He staked his horse out in the brush, and scouted a complete circle around the house to make sure there was no fresh sign anywhere, before going into the place. Then he entered the ghostly entrance hall.

Off to one side was a lofty-ceilinged parlor, yellow-striped by shafts of moonlight shooting through sagging shutters. There was an elliptical staircase leading to an upper floor.

The furniture had been auctioned off to the brush people by the Sewell estate, and Reid had to be satisfied with the bare floor for a bed. He was too exhausted to care. He had little fear that Gale or whoever he meant to meet would be coming upstairs, and he wanted to be on the scene when they arrived. And he needed sleep. That came almost immediately.

He did not know whether it was the heat that awoke him, or the light. He was conscious of both. The light was bright enough to hurt his eyes, when he opened them. The heat filled the room, a dry, insufferable heat that seemed to press him down into the floor, drawing sweat from him till it drenched his clothes.

He rolled over. It couldn't be that hot in the early morning. Through gaping French windows that opened onto a gallery, he could see the brush stretching away on all sides like a sea. The shadows were almost directly beneath the mesquite. Noon?

He stood up, grimacing at the brassy taste in his mouth. His head was pounding with the heat, he felt a faint nausea.

He had reached the door when he heard the noise downstairs. It was the faintest creak of a board. Instinctively, his hand went to his gun. Then he moved cautiously to the head of the stairs. There was more movement down below. Then a man stepped into view at the foot of the stairs. It was Irl Allison.

Reid was too surprised to move in that moment. Allison's head turned upward. A strange contempt was in his face as he finally caught sight of Reid.

"Come on down," he said. "I want to kill you."

"Irl—" Reid held out a hand, with the intensity of his plea, starting down toward the man. "You don't really believe I brought them down on you and Obed."

"How else could they have come so soon? The man stood tall, and stooped, his

eyes implacable. "Obed had been my partner a long time, Reid. It was like you'd killed my own kin. The only reason I didn't get it too was because I didn't have a gun. I'd given mine to you. But now I've got one, Reid. I'll give you a chance to draw." Some savage eagerness entered his voice. "Come on, Reid. I want you to draw!"

Reid was at the landing now. "You've got this all wrong, Irl. It was Karl Venth who told Stennet I was at your place. They wanted somebody to put all this rustling on. They're the ones who've been doin' it. Lee Gale is in on it, too. He's going to meet the man behind it here today. That's why I came."

"That's not the way I heard it," Allison said bitterly. "Stennet's pullin' all his hands out of the brush. He heard you were goin' to work another cut of cattle over here, and he's comin' with his whole crew. I talked with one of 'em about nine-thirty this mornin'. I took the short cut."

REID had almost reached him now.

"Irl, you don't really think I deliberately led the pack of them to your place."

"Your own story tripped you," Allison told him. "You said they couldn't have trailed you."

"That's it. They couldn't have. I told you, Karl—"

"He didn't tell 'em. It was you that deliberately led Stennet to our place, Reid. You hoped we'd hold 'em up long enough for you to get away. You knew how hot the feelin' was by then. You didn't care whether we got killed or not. All you cared about was your own stinkin' hide." His voice was trembling now, and had fallen so low it was barely audible. "Now, draw, damn you, and quit talkin'! Draw, or I'll shoot you down in cold blood!"

Reid stood staring at him, a foot away. The sweat ran down his face. The heat brought that pounding of pulse to his head once more. Allison was swaying forward, eyes fixed intently, almost fanatically on his face. The violence and betrayal of the past days seemed to have taken all the kindness from Allison's own face, leaving only a gaunt, bitter mask.

"I can't draw on you, Irl," Reid told him.

"Can't you?" Allison's voice broke shrilly, as he stepped foward to slap Reid across the face.

Reid took a step backward, his whole right arm stiffening in instinctive reaction. Allison bent forward, yanking his gun from its holster. Then he saw that Reid had not drawn. He stood trembling heavily at the bottom of the steps, his gun pointed at Reid.

"Damn you!" he said, almost crying. "Damn you!" His voice trailed off as he stared emptily at Reid.

Finally he lowered his gun, and his shoulders sagged. His eyes dropped to the floor. He stood that way a moment longer, looking at nothing, then started to turn and go. His motion took Reid's eyes with it, until they struck the figure standing in the door. Irl Allison saw it at the same time, and halted.

"Bomar!"

The heavy-set man in the doorway dabbed absently at the sweat on his face, emitting a breathless chuckle. "Lord, man, I thought you were goin' to kill him for a minute, there." He sobered, coming into the room. "It would have been a bad mistake, Allison. I still think Reid is an innocent victim in all of this. You've got to get out, both of you. My brother and his whole crew are right behind me. I took a cut-off and got ahead of 'em in the hopes I could stop this thing. David's in a killin' mood."

"But I can't go now," Reid said. "Is Lee Gale with your brother?"

Bomar frowned. "Come to think of it, he isn't. I reckon they couldn't locate him out in the brush."

"Gale was to meet the man behind all this right here," Reid told him. "That's why you couldn't find him."

"That won't help you now, boy." Bomar Stennet came forward, grabbing Reid's arm insistently. "You've got to get out! Take the back way. David's comin' by the trail that'll lead him to the front."

"Is Gordon Walker with him?"

"Of course not. You know Walker is never around when dirty work turns up."

"He's the one Gale was to meet then," Reid said.

"What's the difference?" asked Bomar. "It's past noon, son. If Walker's the one, he and Gale have probably already met. It's your own skin you've got to save."

He broke off, cocking his head to the rustle of brush from far out. Then he pinched Reid's arm again.

"Out the back way, quick! You'll be killed if you stay here, son, I swear!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Man Behind*

WITH a sinking feeling, Reid realized the logic in what Bomar Stennet said. He had lost. A bleak expression draining his face of its vitality, he wheeled and started down the hall. It was littered with wainscoting that had warped off the wall, and heaps of fallen plaster. He made a shuffling, rattling sound, going through it toward the back door. He was almost there when something struck him. What had Bomar said? "It's past noon!"

That thought stopped him, to look back. Irl Allison was just going out the front door, a tall, stooped shape in the sunlit rectangle. Bomar Stennet stood where Reid had left him, a heavy-bellied silhouette with the light behind him, turning his white hair to a snowy nimbus.

"Hurry, boy!"

"Yeah. Yeah."

Reid had reached the rear stairs. They cut the right side of the hall off from Bomar's sight. Reid moved over onto that side.

Now he could have gone out the wide back door without Bomar seeing him. Instead, he turned to take the steps two at a time, on his toes, pulling the old Thuers conversion from his belt as he went up. In the upper hall, he found a bedroom door, slipped through this into the room. There were deep windows overlooking the back, most of the glass smashed out of them by winds to lie in scattered, glittering heaps across the floor. Reid's boots crunched through this as he moved across to look out the windows.

For a moment, he saw nothing but the flat yard with brush encroaching on every side, forming little coves of open ground that thrust themselves into the mesquite.

Then, behind a coma tree, to one side of the door, he saw—Lee Gale! With a saddle-gun drawn dead bead on the back door, in a perfect position to cut down the man who was supposed to walk out that door.

Reid backed away from the window, slipped across the room to the door. This opened into the hall directly at the head of the stairs, and before he was halfway through, he was wheeled around by motion at the foot of the stairs. Bomar stood down there, staring up at him, a gun in his hand.

Reid threw himself headlong down the hall as the shot smashed out. He struck the floor and rolled over and over on down the hall, with plaster raining down on him from where the bullet had knocked it off the ceiling. Then he came to his feet and raced for the front stairs, hearing Bomar's voice downstairs.

"Lee, he's in here! We've got to get him!"

Reid heard Bomar running down the hall beneath him. But the man had a late start. Reid took the steps two at a time, hugging the wall so Bomar could not get him through the railing. As he reached the bottom, however, Bomar was far enough down the hall to see him, and fired again.

The bullet struck the marble newel post and screamed off in ricochet. Reid answered with one of his own precious bullets, driving Bomar into the shelter of a doorway. He had that second of choice, before Bomar came back out of the door to take another shot.

He wheeled to dart down the hall and through the living room door on the right that would lead him outside. But through the front door, out in the bright sunlight, he saw David Stennet and the first of his men break from the brush. They were grim-faced, and their saddle-guns were already across their pommels. They looked ready to shoot at sight of Reid.

Instead of heading for the front, he

wheeled and plunged across the hall, taking another shot at the doorway as he ran. This drove Bomar back just as he started to step forward and fire. Reid went through the dining room door at a dead run, tripping over a smashed chair and almost going on his face. He saw French windows opening onto an iron-railed side gallery, and plunged through plaster and wrecked furniture and the fallen remains of a glass chandelier to reach the doors.

THEY were locked, with myriad shards of glass yet remaining in the small frames. He kicked these flimsy frames out with a boot till there was a space big enough to crouch through.

But Bomar had anticipated him. The gallery ran along the whole side of the house, and Bomar must have crossed the hall and gone through the kitchen to gain this side. For as Reid crouched through, another French door opened almost at the rear of the house, and Bomar stepped through it. He lifted his gun as he sighted Reid.

Crouched over, Reid was in no position to fire. He threw the whole weight of his body back through the hold he had made, glass tearing clothes and flesh, and fell on his back in the room. The roar of the shot came at the same time. The bullet buzzed across the space he had occupied a moment before and smashed into the broken glass in the remaining frames, making a tinkling crash.

Bleeding from a dozen cuts, the breath knocked out of him by the fall, Reid rolled over and came up, panting with the desperation of a trapped animal. There was no calculation left in him now, and he merely plunged for the last exit left to him—the same door through which he had entered the room—with a half-formed prayer that he could get out there before Gale showed.

He was almost to the door when Bomar shouted:

"Get him, Gale! He's comin' back into the hall!"

That brought Reid to a sliding halt at the door, keeping himself from going through by one hand on the frame. The lower hall made an impact of dark emptiness on his eyes. Then sound and motion from above snapped his gaze up the stairs. Lee Gale had just reached the head of the stairs, coming to a running stop, and seeing Reid about the same time Reid saw him. That saddle-gun came up.

Reid was not even aware of his own gun lifting. He squeezed the trigger. There was a great blasting roar that seemed to shake him. He squeezed again, again. He saw Gale stiffen, drop the gun, topple. The delicate railing made a crackle like rumpled paper as Gale's heavy body went through, and the whole house seemed to shake when he hit the floor below.

Then, in some obscure reflex, Reid was wheeling back. But it was too late. Bomar stood in the French doors, ugly determination hardening the smooth flesh of his face, with his gun aimed at Reid. The shot was like the echo of those other shots, its reverberations shuddering through the house and deafening Reid.

But somehow no bullet struck him. Somehow Bomar seemed to grow rigid, shock gaping his mouth and his eyes squinting tight with the first agony of pain, and then his whole heavy body twisted around as he fell. He struck one of the heavy posts between the doors and slid down it to end up in a sitting position, facing out across the gallery.

Then Irl Allison walked into view from the rear end of the gallery, his smoking gun in his hand, staring down at Bomar with his great, sad eyes.

"Thought I'd stick around," he told Reid. "I headed around back. Got there about the same time Gale went in after you." He looked up at Reid, shaking his head. "I reckon I've got a lot to apologize for, haven't I, Mayne?"

Then the Stennet crew was flooding in and around the house, a pair of them coming in the door behind Reid, and David Stennet and half a dozen others riding around to the gallery.

David swung off his horse and slung a leg over the iron railing to drop within the gallery, staring at his brother.

"If I got this straight now," Allison told him, "your brother is the man behind all our trouble."

"You're lyin'—you're crazy!" David told

him, kneeling by Bomar. "You've killed him, Allison. You'll hang for this!"

REID had reached the French doors now, with the Chipped Moon hands right behind him, their rifles digging into his back. He realized that if it had been past noon when Bomar had first appeared here, he must have met Gale already, and the evidence had been transferred.

"Look in his coat pockets before you pass your final judgment," he told David.

The man half-rose, face black with rage, but Irl Allison's calm voice stopped him. "You'd better do it. Why else would your brother have cut loose of you before you got here? He had to warn Gale and get Reid."

Confusion fluttered in David Stennet's eyes. Then he dropped to his knees again and started going through Bomar's pockets. From the inside one he brought the tally-book and a dirty roll of bills, wet with blood. Slowly, reluctantly, he opened the tally-book. Bomar's eyes had opened, filmed with pain. David looked up at him sorrowfully.

"You've even got Chipped Moon stuff tallied in here. Why, Bomar? Why?"

Bomar's voice came weakly. "I appreciated the moral support you and Walker and the rest of the big operators were givin' me in my campaign, David. But none of you had sold enough cattle to chip in any money. I needed that more'n the moral support."

"But what about the maverick law? If you were behind this rustling, the law would have made your operations twice as dangerous."

"I had no faith the law would go through, but I had to pretend I backed it, didn't I?" Bomar said. "Naturally I was better off under the present set-up. As long as maverickin' hid the real rustlin', there was constant fightin' between the little men and the big. I could play them against each other."

He coughed, blood dribbling over his lips. David tried to help him, but Bomar waved him away. His voice was weaker now.

"I made a wrong bid all along the line, David. I'd taken so many cracks at the big politics and missed so many times, just because I didn't have enough money behind me to give a decent campaign. I guess it twisted my thinkin'." He shook his head, raised his fluttering eyes to Reid. "One thing I'd like to know. How did you catch on that I was the one coming here to meet Gale?"

"You told me it was past noon, in the house." Reid said. "I'd told you Gale was goin' to meet the man behind everything here. I hadn't mentioned any time."

The man tried to laugh, but it came out in a horrible gurgle. "I guess I'm goin' now," he said, in a choked voice.

His breathing stopped. David Stennet rose slowly, staring down at him. Then he spoke to Allison in a strained voice.

"Can I apologize, Allison? I thought you brushmen were the cause of all our trouble."

"Maybe we both should apologize," Allison told him. "I thought you was keepin' things stirred up to force the little men out."

"Will it be all right with you if I call a meetin' of both little and big men, and ask Reid to give us more specific details on this association—" David glanced down at Bomar—"in a few days?"

"Any time you want, Mr. Stennet," said Allison.

David Stennet looked up at Reid. "How about it, Reid?"

"Fine with me," Reid told him.

"I guess that about finishes it, then."

"Not quite," Reid told him. "If you'll loan me a horse, there's one more little thing I'd like to clean up before it's all over."

"I don't think you'll need a horse," David told him. "I have a good idea Caskie followed us out here. She's probably just about breakin' brush out of the trail now."

Reid stared blankly at Stennet. Then he turned to walk down the gallery. He was running by the time he reached its end, going off the steps. He saw her come free of the brush and catch sight of him, swing off her horse, and come running to meet him, the great relief on her face breaking into a glowing happiness.

That happiness filled him too, with the thought that something so ugly was over, and something so beautiful about to start. So beautiful he could not even speak as he reached her and took her in his arms and held her the way he knew he would hold her the rest of his life. • • •

*Dutch Gruber had to mix into a red-hot range war before he could save a wedding and provide a . . .*

# GIFT FOR THE BRIDE

## By GIFF CHESHIRE

DUTCH GRUBER had polished the mounted holsters until in the subdued light of his cobbler shop the holsters and their leather mounting possessed a beautiful ox-blood glow. There was a soft smile on Dutch's heavy, clean-shaven face. His thick legs were widespread from the low stool that supported his great weight, and a big, strong hand still held a brush. The present for Ann Summers had been finished a week ago, and this was the last time he would give it a buffing. The wedding would

be at the hotel in the morning.

Two six-shooters lay on the shelf under the counter beside Dutch, guns with thumb-worn hammers and shining grips. They fitted the two hand-tooled holsters Dutch had mounted on a heavy leather plaque. Side by side and retired from service, these guns had once blazed at each other. Dutch eyed his work, certain that he had created a fitting symbol of the peace brought to the basin by the cleverness of a woman. Only the men who had owned the guns and Dutch himself knew about this wedding present. Getting the guns into his possession had been an achievement in itself.

Dutch could see Ann across the empty street of Black Bow for, as with himself, she liked to work near her window. Dutch knew he would miss Ann and her seamstress shop, which would be closed after today. Following tomorrow's wedding, she would move out to the Diamond H with Jeff Hardwick. She would do so with confidence that the blood feud between Jeff's Diamond H and Cobie Enders' Rake outfit had been settled for good and all. The plaque Dutch hoped she would hang over the fireplace out there would always remind her of that.

Up to a month ago it had seemed certain that there would be a shooting over Ann, with two stubborn hotheads courting her. Dutch always had to grin to himself when he remembered the neat way Ann had settled the trouble, refusing to choose between her two suitors until they had foresworn their guns and agreed to abide by her choice. Cobie Enders had lived up to the agreement after Ann picked Jeff. He had been the first to succumb to Dutch's wheedling and turn over his gun for the wedding present.

Acknowledging finally that he couldn't improve this bit of leather-craft any further, Dutch laid down his brush. He slipped the two guns into place and gently laid the plaque in a cardboard box he had got from the mercantile. He had only to wrap the gift, and he would do that this evening in his quarters behind the cobbler shop.

Now Dutch displayed his big body boldly at his window. Ann noticed and waggled her fingers at him, and for an instant he was poignantly aware of the happiness it had given him to have her across the street the past three years. Ann kept moving her hand and it dawned on Dutch that she was beckoning him. He took off his leather apron and stepped out onto the walk. He lowered himself from walk to street with ponderous care, then ambled across the dusty tracks of the thoroughfare.

ANN was holding up a man's shirt when Dutch filled the doorway of her little business place. The shirt was white and a needle was still thrust through the cloth beside a buttonhole she had been working on.

"Nice," Dutch said. "But too big for Jeff."

"Yours," Ann said. "And I'm worried if it's big enough."

"Mine?" Dutch asked in puzzled astonishment.

Smiling, Ann rose and came toward him, small and slim yet with a woman's full roundness under her simple dress. "I want you to wear it to the wedding, Dutch, but I'm worried about the size."

"Well, now," Dutch said. Her reference to his enormous body didn't bother him the way it did when some jokester claimed he was the elephant the boys had come to town to see. Ann held the shirt up to him studiously, her pretty head cocked to the side.

"I think I guessed it right," Ann said. "I'll finish the buttonholes and press it for you."

"For me, Ann?" Dutch asked, still unbelieving.

"For you and the three years it's been so nice having you across the street from me." Ann dismissed him in a busy woman's way and resumed her sewing.

Elation bubbled in Dutch's heart as he recrossed the street. Ann had wanted to give him a gift before she moved out of Black Bow. That made his wedding present doubly right. Dutch grinned as he flung an idle glance along the street. Morg Oxman, who ran the only sheep in the basin, came out of the saloon next door, tipped Dutch an absent-minded nod and went on to his horse. Oxman swung aboard his horse and turned it hurriedly up the street. He was a hard driving man, a set one, and Dutch had

never liked him.

A rancher loading groceries into a buckboard next to where Oxman's horse had stood flung a friendly scowl at Dutch.

"Maybe Morg's worried about that new flock of woollies I hear he's brought in," the rancher said.

Dutch swung slowly on the walk to stare at the man. "Oxman's brought in more sheep?" he asked.

"That's what I hear, Dutch. And his range is already over-stocked."

Dutch re-entered his shop, frowning thoughtfully. He didn't like to hear that. So far Oxman hadn't been much of a threat with his sheep, though a nuisance to both Diamond H and Rake, which joined his grazing land. The way Ann had put down the bad blood between the two cattle spreads had been a blessing. It would be too bad to have sheep trouble break out now.

Going to his boot last, Dutch resumed his regular daily work. A cobbler's life was simple but never monotonous when a man honored his craft and was honored by those he served. The shirt Ann had made, busy as she was with her wedding preparations, was the greatest honor Dutch had ever received. Let anyone bring a moment's unhappiness to that girl and he would have Dutch Gruber to deal with.

The man who entered presently did not pass the windows, so that it startled Dutch when he looked up to see Cobie Enders across the counter. It wasn't Cobie's entrance but his face that made Dutch stare. Cobie was a young man, thick through the shoulders and lean of thigh. He was good-looking in a rugged way, but now his face was set. Something Dutch didn't like smoldered in Cobie's gray eyes.

"My gun, Dutch," Cobie said. "I need it back."

Dutch had tacks in his mouth, a hammer in his hand. He spat out the tacks, put the hammer down and climbed heavily to his feet. He came to the counter and put both hands on its top. Though Cobie wasn't small, the cobbler looked down into his eyes.

"Why?" Dutch asked in a soft, thin voice.

"Never mind why." Cobie swung his head impatiently. It was the head of a bull when Cobie was riled, and that angry, determined toss always made Dutch think of that.

"You gave me the gun," Dutch said. "I'll keep it, I think."

"Not to go up on any wall with Jeff Hardwick's gun!" Cobie spat. "I ain't an Indian giver, Dutch. But I ain't a fool, either. I'll thank you for my gun back."

Dutch sighed. It wasn't that the wedding present had been spoiled already. Something had gone wrong, and Cobie was in the mood for action and not for words. Something between Cobie and Jeff, or Cobie wouldn't have used Jeff's name. Dutch didn't want Cobie to see the plaque with the holsters mounted on it. He bent with effort, opened the box under the counter, and slid Cobie's old cedar-gripped gun out of the leather. He placed the gun on the counter, saying nothing.

COBIE grinned then, and it wasn't a pleasant expression. He slid the gun under his pants band and went out.

Dutch returned to his boot last, but now he could only stare across at the empty holster in the matched set. He thought of the shirt Ann was giving him. Now he had no wedding present, in return. But that wasn't important, he reminded himself. He knew without being told that for some reason the old blood feud had broken out again. Dutch knew Ann. She wouldn't marry Jeff if it had.

It only increased the numbness in Dutch's big shoulders when Jeff Hardwick came in a little late. Jeff was as unlike Cobie Enders as a man could be—tall and lean and genial of voice and ways. But a bad man to monkey with, a hothead in his own fashion.

"Dutch," Jeff said, "I got to take it back."

"The gun," Dutch said. It wasn't a question. "Maybe you'll at least give a man a reason."

"Enders got his gun back, didn't he?" Jeff asked. "Well, don't you think it's a good idea to put mine where it belongs—on my hip?"

"What happened, Jeff?"

"Somebody," Jeff said, with a tired sigh, "dragged Chappie Jones at the end of a rope,

last night. Like to have killed Chapp. Rake's plumb certain one of my men did it."

Dutch pulled up his heavy shoulders. Chappie Jones was young Cobie Enders' foreman, a truculent individual who hadn't been too happy over the truce and who kept the Rake's crew feeling much the same way.

"Boundary trouble again?" Dutch asked.

"I just don't know, Dutch," Jeff said. "Rake claims Chappie was roped and jerked out of his saddle, from behind, as he rode out of the Crinkle Creek ford. Chappie don't know who did it. And none of my riders'll admit they do. But there was reason. We found a dead sheep in the water tank next to the boundary."

"Tit-for-tat again," Dutch said tiredly. "One outfit pulls a stinking trick. Then the other tries to go one better. Pretty soon somebody's shot." The cobbler reached under the counter. "Take your gun, Jeff. You and Cobie Enders blow each other's brains out so the rest of us can have some peace. But before you start, go over and tell Ann so she can quit figuring on the wedding." He laid the .45 on the counter.

Jeff looked away. "I know, Dutch. The hell of it is, I can't help it. Everybody's in town, getting barbered and buying duds for the wedding. I seen Cobie come out of here with his gun under his belt. Maybe the son knows it'll make Ann call off the wedding. Or else they mean to square it for Chappie." At least there seemed to be some reluctance in the way Jeff picked up his .45 and tried to conceal it under the waistband of his trousers before he went out onto the street where Ann could see him from her shop window.

But Ann wasn't watching, intent maybe on the buttonholes she was making in Dutch's new shirt. The big cobbler stood by the counter rubbing his carefully shaved chin. That water tank near Diamond H's north boundary, Dutch knew, was an old sore-spot. Years before it had started friction that had lasted ever since. Originally Rake had claimed the springs, but a survey had put them well beyond the line on the Diamond H side. Since then Rake had never missed a chance to show its resentment. The tank had even been poisoned, and once an attempt had been made to dynamite it out of existence. Diamond H was just as bad, retaliating any way it could. This new outbreak was an old story.

Understanding the cow country and its sentiments, Dutch didn't know which was worse, throwing a dead sheep in a tank that made a big patch of graze usable, or dragging a man at the end of a rope. Both were well avoided but both had happened, and Dutch knew that Black Bow might not witness a wedding on the morrow.

Yet there was the smallest chance that it might blow over, if the next hours passed without more trouble. Ann didn't know that the two guns had been turned over to Dutch so he could make a meaningless peace plaque. If nothing further happened before the wedding—Dutch shook his head. From the way Jeff had acted he meant only to defend himself if Cobie crowded him. But Jeff wouldn't marry Ann without telling her.

It was too bad Cobie and Jeff hadn't met in here, Dutch thought, and tried talking it over. They might have reached the reasonable conclusion that it was foolish to let hotheads on their payrolls start up the old trouble. Urgency was rising in Dutch, concern not only for the blood that might be spilled but for the wedding that was in jeopardy. Maybe he could still get them together on it. Dutch hadn't much hope but he reached for his hat.

HE ARRIVED at the Wagon Wheel Saloon to learn that both men had left town, going back to join their outfits, clearing Black Bow of what riders were already in for the celebration. All was forgotten now except the new row and the old string of unforgiven resentments. It would be Cobie's turn to move next, and Cobie was the more unstable of the two men. Dutch knew that Rake would strike at Jeff's Diamond H before morning. And once again the whole basin would be embroiled in conflict, and the start of that renewed schism was already evident in the Wagon Wheel.

"Blazes," a man was saying, "there's no two ways about it. Chappie Jones started it for Rake. Maybe he only seen a chance to do some dirty work and couldn't resist it.

Oxman's sheep range lays east of them two spreads, and sometimes his woollies stray across the divide. Both outfits shoot 'em when that happens. That's likely what Chappie done. Then it struck him as a good idea to throw a carcass in the Diamond H tank. You boys know what that does. Cows won't touch sheeped water or sheeped grass."

"Al, you're talking through your hat," another man said heatedly. "And if you weren't, dragging a man could be worse than killing him outright. They say Chappie's in bad shape. I don't blame Rake for gettin' up on its hind legs about it."

Dutch Gruber walked out, shaking his head. Time after time he had seen a squabble between the two ranches inflame the whole basin. But the mention of Oxman had made Dutch remember what he had heard of the man's bringing in another flock of sheep, for which he had no apparent grass. Dutch paused on the walk, a feeling like the crackling of electricity shooting along his spine. Maybe Oxman intended to get himself more grass and wanted to divide the basin hopelessly before he invaded it further.

Cobie Enders was the one with whom to argue that viewpoint since the next move would be his. It was a long ride out to Rake, and as much as Dutch Gruber hated the saddle, he headed for the livery. They had a big bay gelding that could carry him when he had to ride. Dutch entered the livery stable and asked for it.

It was an hour past dark when he sighted the few lights of Rake. Dutch rode toward them, thankful that he was welcome on any spread in the basin. The minute he rode into the ranchyard he sensed the tension in the atmosphere. Men stood, sat or hunkered in knots and not for idle evening talk. Every man swung a look at Dutch, and where he ordinarily would have been greeted with noisy cordiality, nobody spoke to him now.

He found Cobie in the ranch office, alone and brooding. Cobie had his gun in its holster on his hip, where men didn't weight themselves unnecessarily in leisure hours. He flung Dutch a startled look, for the cobbler's size kept him from getting around.

"Cobie," Dutch said without preamble, "habit can be a damned bad thing. You never stopped to think twice about who drug Chappie, did you?"

"Why should I?" Cobie asked thinly.

"If you had," Dutch said calmly, "Diamond H might have thought twice about who sheeped its water tank. I saw Jeff. Yes, he came for his gun. But he didn't know about it—if one of his riders roped Chappie and drug him. Any more than you could have told Chappie to throw a sheep carcass in that tank. Didn't, did you?"

Cobie shook his head. "No."

"All right," Dutch said. "Morg Oxman has brought in a lot more sheep, I hear. Oxman or some of his tough herders did both jobs."

"Oxman? Dutch you've gone battier than a sheepherder, yourself."

"You think it over," Dutch said, "before you try to even the score."

Cobie only laughed. "You're some anxious to see Jeff married up to Ann Summers, ain't you?"

"That's right," Dutch agreed. "Tomorrow, the way Ann planned."

He rode off, doubting that he had achieved a thing. Now he wanted to see Jeff and felt that Jeff would be more inclined to listen. It was more than the fact that Jeff stood to lose more than Cobie if the fight really got going. Jeff always had been the more reasonable of the two. Jeff himself had done nothing to break the truce, and probably would do no more than to defend himself, his riders and his property. Those items he would fight for to the limit.

On the other hand, Dutch was pretty sure from the bitter way Cobie had spoken of the impending marriage that jealousy had got in its work with Cobie in spite of the gentlemen's agreement to abide by Ann's choice. Peace would never be possible, anyway, if that were the case. So perhaps it was as well that things had come to a boil before the wedding ceremony.

Dutch was less than half the distance to Diamond H when he pulled down the big gelding. He had been riding slowly and thus had heard the rhythm of driving hoofs ahead of him. It would be riders coming from Diamond H, and it looked like they would be heading for Rake. But they veered away

from Dutch, the sound fading again into the night. Dutch went on, puzzled and disturbed. The score was even, at this point, and it wasn't like Jeff to crowd.

PRESENTLY Dutch realized he was nearing the Diamond H tank that had caused so many quarrels. As he drew nearer he also grew aware of another horseman, beyond the tank and, crossing the open slope at a trot, heading for the pass in the hogbacks. Dutch yelled, then dug his heels, and saw the other rider abruptly swing toward him.

Even before they met Dutch identified Jeff. Dutch bawled, "Jeff, is it your boys who're riding on Rake?"

Jeff pulled down his horse. He had his hands crossed on the saddlehorn and looked old and tired and dispirited. "Wouldn't know," he said, "but it could be. Lefty Milhorn didn't come in this evening. Couple of the boys found him up here. Shot through the head. Lefty was only doing an outriding job. The boys took it hard."

"You fools!" Dutch breathed. "The lot of you couldn't muster one good set of brains! Morg Oxman is behind it all. Heard today he's brought in more sheep. He's coming into the basin. How can you cowmen fight him if you're fighting among yourselves?"

"Let your hackles down, Dutch," Jeff said. "It happens I thought of that, myself. I'm going over to see Morg now."

That took the heat out of Dutch's brain. He might have known Jeff would think more dispassionately about it than Cobie would. If he had ever doubted the wisdom of Ann's choice between the two, he couldn't now.

He said, "That's more what I like to hear. I'll go with you, Jeff."

"Come along."

Dutch kept shaking his head as he rode on beside Jeff, his direction changed to point toward the low divide in the hogbacks. It had finally come to murder—a Diamond H outrider shot down while going harmlessly about his chores. The dead puncher's saddlemates were riding with the lust to avenge his death. Jeff hadn't authorized the punitive expedition but Jeff knew what Dutch also acknowledged. It couldn't be stopped until it was proved that the whole thing was a vicious scheme to make dupes of them all.

They had reached the top of the long slope and were on the point of entering the low, rocky portals of the pass when half a dozen men loomed on the trail ahead of them. The party hadn't been riding, for Dutch had heard nothing, nor had Jeff. The men were stretched across the trail, a living fence, and they all held guns. Dutch's gaze went at once to Morg Oxman, who stood in the middle of the line.

"Where you gents think you're going?" Oxman called.

"To your side of the hills, Morg," Jeff answered easily. "Looks like you halfway expected somebody."

"Heard you cow nurses are feuding," Oxman answered. "I figure to keep the squabble on your side of the divide."

"You've got a lot of men with you, Oxman," Dutch said. "They look more like gunmen than sheepherders. Is it the crew you mean to use when you invade the basin with your new flock?"

Oxman pulled up his shoulders, staring back at Dutch. "That's a plain question," he said, "and it gets a plain answer. I ain't been allowed my share of the plateau graze. This is the crew I mean to use to get it. But only to protect my sheep when I come across with 'em."

"There's been murder," Dutch said flatly. "That guarantees that you won't cross over, Oxman. You'll hang, and that will be the end of you and your sheep."

"Who'll see that I hang?" Oxman demanded. "Who but a squarehead like you would try to connect me with what happened to Jeff's outrider?"

"Outrider?" Dutch breathed. "So you know without being told who was murdered. That ties you to it, Oxman, and Jeff heard it. Now, Jeff, we'd best see if this will help us stop the foolishness at Cobie Enders." Dutch swung the gelding, though every cell in his big body was cold. Apparently he and Jeff were the only ones in the basin with enough cool reason to have seen through Oxman's designs in time. Once the basin was divided, Oxman wouldn't care about

secrecy. He had men enough to put through his project.

Oxman's words had the ring of inevitability. "Not tonight," he intoned. "You two jeebows are going over to the sheep camp for tonight. And unless you can forget this foolishness about murder, you're apt to stay somewhere in that vicinity. Boys, get Jeff's gun. And watch Dutch. Don't know if a bullet would get through that lard to reach anything vital."

Dutch knew they were caught. He had no gun and was only a handicap to Jeff who, alone, might have stood a chance of shooting his way out of this. The horses stirred nervously as Oxman's fence of men began to wheel slowly, closing about them.

"Ride, Jeff!" Dutch called, and he drove the gelding straight at Oxman.

JEFF saw the faint ray of hope Dutch had seen. Both horses lunged forward, into the nearby rocks of the pass, into Oxman's own territory. If Oxman had expected a break he had looked for it to be made in the other direction, toward Diamond H's plateau. Now the driving horses sent men scattering and intermixed them to a point where they did not dare open up with their guns. Jeff swung in behind Dutch, though his horse was lighter and faster. But by the time Oxman's gunman began to shoot, the two riders were up in the pass and hidden by the rise.

They kept pounding it, though riding like that was punishment to Dutch. They passed the horses Oxman's party had left so as not to warn oncomers of their presence in the pass. Now Dutch slowed, Jeff coming up beside him. Jeff had his gun in his hand. They had only minutes before the sheepers would be mounted and coming after them.

They came out on the eastern slope and Jeff swung north. This puzzled Dutch, but Jeff knew the country while Dutch had only a hazy notion of it. Now they could hear the blatting of sheep below them, and finally the starlight disclosed the distant band, a huge one, that Oxman had brought here to make his initial invasion of the cattle basin. But soon they left this behind, for now they could hear the sound of running horses in the rearward distance. Dutch repressed a groan of discomfort as again he picked up speed with Jeff.

Presently Jeff swung them in against the hogbacks once more, and Dutch knew he was seeking a way to recross. That would put them over on Rake range. It seemed strange to Dutch that Jeff should be seeking sanctuary on Rake land.

"It's two to one against us," Jeff called. "Them sheepers know these hills. They'll try to head us off."

They were weaving their way in upon the ridge, slowed to a walk by the climb. The hills were bare, flat loaves of earth under the stars. The sound of the sheep fell behind, but the drumming of hoofs came closer.

Presently Jeff halted them, listened a moment, then said, "They expect us to cross back over here. They've split into two bunches. One on each side. Dutch, we better pick the place, instead of them. Come on."

Dutch wished for a gun, though he wasn't a marksman. Again he had the deep, regretful feeling of only having handicapped Jeff by coming along. But Jeff wasn't kicking and had no thought but to make a fight for the both of them. They rode on for another ten minutes, coming then to one of the stands of pine that thinly freckled the hogbacks.

"This'll be as good as any," Jeff said, and he turned his horse into the pines.

There were things a rangeman could know and tell that were lost to Dutch. For the last few minutes Dutch had heard nothing to indicate pursuit in any direction. But he trusted the intuitive wariness in Jeff that had brought him here for a stand.

Not until he was dismounted and flattened, with the ground's vibration to help him, did Dutch detect the tell-tale drum of hoofs that had been evident to Jeff much longer. Dutch hoped that Oxman's gunmen wouldn't find them but realized it was a forlorn hope. Oxman knew this vicinity and had the same sense that had guided Jeff. There was no doubt that Oxman would try to kill them at the next contact.

Jeff had taken a look at his gun and ad-

justed his ammunition belt so that its loops were handy to his fingers. They had kept their horses close, carefully ground-haltered.

Jeff whispered, "If we can deal with a party at a time we stand a chance. And if I sight 'em, I'll cut loose, Dutch. Surprise is the only trump we've got."

Dutch grunted assent, knowing they would have to fight to survive at all. But even if only one party showed up, it would be Jeff against three or four gunmen. The shooting would bring on the rest of Oxman's men. The hoofbeats were close now, the riders coming in from the basin side, probing this spot because it was the closest likely place where the quarry could cross the divide. Then all at once Jeff's gun rent the silence of the night.

Dutch lay flat and helpless, unable to keep track of things. Jeff's gun spoke at careful intervals, the return fire telling Dutch that Oxman's men had flung themselves down out beyond the edge of the woods, covered by the terrain and the night. If they could be kept out of the woods, and if Oxman's other party didn't hear the racket and come in, there was a chance, Dutch believed.

HE WAS not a gunfighter, but on the other hand Dutch Gruber was not a man to lie still while another fought for his life. Dutch was worried about the danger of Jeff's being flanked. Out past the open interval, a rock wing would let an Oxman man creep to the left and circle into the woods. Dutch began to push himself backward, careful not to attract Jeff's attention. He moved out to the edge of the woods at a point where he could see the end of the rock wing. There he waited.

He had barely stationed himself when he became glad of the hunch. New guns opened up ahead of him, laying fire at a tangent into the woods. Dutch understood that Oxman's other party had come in and joined the fight. A full seven men, now. Dutch wanted a gun, he wanted to kill, and he seemed to have no fear for himself. He lay there through long moments, waiting in his certainty that at least one of them would presently try to crawl into the woods.

Then he saw a man make a run between two rocks, bent over, a six-gun held in a raised hand. The man hesitated only a second, then ran out again, bounding openly for the pines because Jeff was not contesting his movement. Dutch moved to his left slightly. Then he rose and surged forward. The surprise of it helped him. The man saw him and wasted a second, and in that interval Dutch hit him with all the impact his big body would generate. The man struggled with his gun, and Dutch expected it to fire and drill him. Dutch swung a meaty fist and hit the man in the belly. He crossed the other fist to the man's face. The fellow dropped in dead weight, and suddenly Dutch had a gun.

His first move was to rap the sheeper hard across the head with the gun barrel. Next he stripped off the shellbelt and threw it across his shoulder, for it was too short to go around him. The other sheepers, at this position, hadn't understood what was happening in the shallow depth of the woods. They still fired in what seemed a haphazard manner. Dutch positioned himself and began to challenge each shot. He silenced a gun, but his small elation quickly died. It sounded suddenly as if half a dozen men had come up from somewhere to join the foe.

Dutch stayed where he was until nobody was shooting at him any more. Then he rose to a crouch and began to make his way among the trees toward Jeff. The brisk fighting still continued on that quarter.

Then suddenly he heard Cobie Enders yell, "Come on, boys! Let's wind up this dirty business!"

Dutch halted in his tracks. Cobie Enders. The man should have been down at Rake fighting off Diamond H's war party. But Dutch heard Jeff answer Cobie with an excited shout. All hell seemed to break loose, then, as guns chattered all about. Then, with ear-tickling abruptness, there was silence.

Dutch made his way on to Jeff, who had climbed to his feet. Without speaking, Jeff moved out of the woods. Cobie Enders and three of his riders were coming out of the rocks on the flank of what had been Ox-

man's position.

Cobie paused, looked at something at his feet, then yelled, "Here's Morg Oxman, himself! Howcome you got into this jackpot, Jeff?"

"Swap you for howcome you showed up," Jeff answered.

"Seen Dutch tonight. Told me about Morg bringing in a new flock of woollies. I got to thinking. Me and the boys started over to ask Morg where he intended to run them sheep. When we got close enough to hear the fracas we figured Morg had already started his invasion. So we slipped up and pitched in."

"Some of my boys call on you?" Jeff asked.

"If they did," Cobie answered, "they didn't find anybody home."

Dutch had to sit down then, and not merely because his arches cried out against the weight of his body. He found a log and used it . . .

IT WAS nine o'clock the next morning when Dutch left his quarters and went out to open the shop. He had not intended to open for business that day but now he had no hope that there would be a wedding. He had gone over to Ann's when he got back to town, the night before. As he had feared, she had heard of the looming trouble. Even when Dutch explained how it had started and how Rake and Diamond H had gone in together, in the end, Ann had shaken her head.

"Look how quick Cobie was to believe the worst," Ann said. "This time it turned out that he was wrong, but there'll be another time. I told those two men how I feel about it. That didn't stop them a minute, when the test came."

Dutch Gruber had given Ann no answer to that. There was none, because Ann was right. So Dutch opened his shop and prepared for business as usual that day.

But he was sitting at his boot last, motionless and thoughtful, when Cobie Enders came in. Cobie had his gun on his hip, but he was friendlier than he had been the day before.

"Howcome, Dutch?" he asked. "Ain't there a wedding, today?"

Dutch shook his head. "Ann don't trust it, any more. And I don't blame her."

Cobie's face sobered. "Don't reckon I do either." He lifted his gun from its holster, placed it on the counter and walked out. But the gun was meaningless, even matched with Jeff's, for already those two hotheads had asked for them back.

Jeff came in almost immediately, with a face as long as a razor strop. "It's up to you, Dutch," he said, laying his gun on the counter beside Cobie's. "Maybe if you gave Ann her wedding present a little early she'd change her mind."

"Not a chance," Dutch said, "with Indian givers."

He came to the counter and picked up Cobie's gun, frowning at its weight. Then he pointed it at his nose and looked into the barrel. A grin broke on his heavy face, for the barrel had been filled with babbit. He had only to lift Jeff's gun to know that it had received the same treatment. They had done it together and voluntarily, and neither gun could ever be used again.

"Get out of here!" Dutch shouted at Jeff. "I've got a wedding present to wrap!"

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# The Wedding of WILD BILL HICKOK

by BERTRAM ROBINSON

"MY EYES are getting bad. The best that I can do with them now is to see a man's form, indistinctly, at sixteen paces. My shooting days are over."

So said James B. (Wild Bill) Hickok to the proprietor of McDaniel's Variety Theater, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, on March 2, 1876. Three days later the famous gunman was married to Mrs. Agnes Lake Thatcher, esquestrienne of the circus ring and a member of the celebrated Lake Troupe, known in circus annals from coast to coast.

The marriage took place at the home of S. L. Moyer, saloon keeper and gambling house proprietor of Cheyenne, who was a warm personal friend of Hickok. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. W. F. Warren, of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The marriage certificate gave the ages of the couple as follows:

James Butler Hickok, age 45.

Agnes Lake Thatcher, age 42.

But it is quite probable that Wild Bill, with his usual chivalry, subtracted a few years from the lady's age and added them to his own, for at the time of his marriage he was really only 38.

### *Hickok Changes Age*

Having previously made his name immortal by the swift and deadly use of the revolver, caliber .45, it may well have been for sentimental reasons that Wild Bill changed his age on the certificate, particular-

**The True Story of a Famous Gunfighter's Romance**

ly as he had but recently made the foregoing recorded remarks.

Wild Bill had a supreme contempt for the lethal powers of the .38 caliber revolver, yet on August 2, 1876, just five months later, he was killed with a single ball from a .38 S & W in the hand of Jack McCall.

"Parson," he remarked to the officiating minister, "this is one knot you will never be called upon to untie, for in a couple of months I am going to the Black Hills, and I don't ever expect to come from those hills alive."

Thus Wild Bill not only proved himself the world's deadliest six-shooter artist, but something of a prophet as well. On the marriage certificate Hickok gave his residence as Laramie County, Wyoming, while Mrs. Thatcher named Cincinnati, Ohio, as her permanent address.

The two had met in Cheyenne during a performance of the Lake Troupe a few days before, on which occasion a lady lion tamer had been mauled frightfully by an African big cat.

Hickok leaped into the ring and rendered first aid, rescuing Mrs. Lake from the claws of the maddened beast with three well-directed shots from his faithful Colt's .45. The first shot entered the animal's right eye and penetrated its brain. This charge brought it down, and the succeeding ones killed it almost in its tracks.

Thus even the one romance of his life was born in the violence that had punctuated most of his tempestuous career.

## The Pioneer Remembers

**With the mem'ry of old voices ringin' softly in my ears,**
**I am settin' on my porch a-lookin' back across the years.**
**I can see the ox-trains movin', an' the rider with the mail,**
**An' the campfire in the evenin' castin' shadders on the trail.**
**I can see the redskins ridin' to attack the pioneer,**
**An' the smoke-plumed cabins risin' all along the old frontier,**
**An' the buffalo a-rangin' on the endless reach of plain,**
**An' the comin' of the railroad, an' the miners seekin' gain.**

**Plain as yesterday I see it—scenes that kind of come an' go**
**Of the people, an' the places, an' the ways I used to know,**
**Times that wuz before the hand of Progress ever took control,**
**Vanished days that I belonged to an' took part in heart an' soul.**
**Now I set here in my rocker, er I loaf around the store,**
**Thinkin' of the times an' doin's that I know will come no more.**
**I am lookin' at the sunset as it lights the Western dome,**
**But my sunset will be sunrise fer new pioneers to come.**

***—Clarence Edwin Flynn***

*Every crack of brush, every tap of stone, meant something to the two men in the shadow of the eerie Green Cat*

*A Pioneer Folk Story*

*by*

**HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK**

# PHANTOM HOOFBEATS

JAGGED forks of lightning speared the scored sides of the mountain range as Dal Baldwin and his companion, little Doc Carson, brought their saddle and pack outfit to a halt on a small plateau.

The thunder gods reveled in their opportunity to manifest their accompaniment to the lightning flashes. Frightening crashes sounded, crashes which exploded in echoing, rolling barrages down the canyons and along the

valleys. Rain deluged as it can only in mountain country.

Dal turned to his little friend and neighbor. "Too bad, Doc," he said softly. "This ain't going to do that arthritic leg of yours any good."

Doc Carson grinned. He stood like a maverick lone yearling caught in a blizzard, his back humped. "Cussed rain'll wash out the hoss trail," he said, growling in his gravelly-toned voice.

Baldwin started. Doc was right.

Their mission up here in this rugged foothills country was to trail a valuable band of Dal's best young horse stock—long yearling fillies and two-year-old colts and fillies for which, next year and the following year, he could command top prices.

Ever since his first sight of the beautiful, rugged Sun Bear Valley country with his bride, Mary, he had been obsessed with a desire to turn his thoughts to a horse spread of his own.

He remembered the day when he had brought his wagon to a halt on the left bank of Sun Bear Creek. He and Mary had been startled by the long, ringing bugle of a wild stallion.

Then they had seen the great one, the king of the wild horse band.

He had stood like a piece of magnificent granite sculpture on a rise of land. King, they had named him, and King had become the first sire of the Baldwin spread, which since had grown by careful breeding to the best stock in Northwest Wyoming.

At first, when his stock had been missed two days ago, Dal had thought they'd just leaped a broken fence and wandered off on their own. He pursued this thought until this morning when little Doc had come across a cast horseshoe, a worn old one. And then they both realized that Dal's stock had been rustled.

Now, the coming of this sudden heavy rain dealt their hopes of recovery a sharp blow, for rain of this intensity might quickly blot out trail sign.

For an hour, the storm gods pounded the mountain country, then mysteriously, as if some unseen force had whispered a cease fire, the storm was done.

SUN POURED down through the roiled clouds, transforming them to coiling mists which licked the scored faces of the mountains. Dal glanced up at the most prominent peak and gasped. Up the scored easterly face of this mountain through ages of time, a timberline had stolen back, creeping in wherever it could to form the distinct shape of a gigantic cat.

Green Cat Mountain! It was well named. Baldwin had seen it before, but had never realized how amazingly perfect was the likeness. He heard a grunt from Doc, and swung about.

Carson, too, was conning the Green Cat, now flushed with sharp sunlight.

"Amazing, huh, Doc?" Dal voiced.

Doc nodded. "It's a mite frightening, Dal. It—why Gawda'mighty, the thing's actually grinning at us, like it's come to life!"

And so it seemed.

Dal swung away. This was as good a point as any at which to make camp for the night. He set to work to tether out the horses beyond a fringe of wild fruit scrub, where the grass was lush.

All was still now save for the chirping of birds which had renewed their activities since the passing of the sharp, brief storm.

Almost before Dal had finished tethering the last of the trio of trail horses, he swung about, clapping a hand to his chest. It was a moment or so before he collected his wits and discovered it was not the palpitation of his heart that had frightened him. It was the hollow, muffled drumbeat of hoofs.

He stepped quickly back to join little Doc, whose whisker-stubbled face was twisted in a strange grimace as he stared, wide-eyed, through a port in the low brush nearby.

Now Dal followed little Doc's point, and his lower jaw sagged. "King!" he gasped hoarsely.

There on a small plateau below stood a replica of the great magnificent stallion of the early days. King, dead these many years. Then in a flash, the big creature was gone.

Dal turned to Doc, laying a hand firmly on his friend's arm.

"Am I crazy, Doc?" he asked. "Or did—did you see him, too?"

Doc squeezed his eyes tightly, then opened

them wide. He spat testily and rubbed the back of a hand over his mouth. He was stalling for time, time to recover his voice which somehow had become trapped in its box.

Now he nodded. "Shore I seen him, Dal, but I still don't believe it. It"—he half turned to crane his neck—"it's the hex of that Green Cat above there."

A low chuckle escaped Baldwin, but it was a mirthless chuckle. He felt none too comfortable. He had roamed through and worked in the wilds here too long to be overcome for long by a fear. Yet when he ventured another glance up at the Green Cat, he shuddered.

Suddenly he swung. "Light fire, Doc," he said softly. "I'll drop down and take a look for tracks. Tracks won't lie even if our eyes and our minds might have played a trick on us."

Shortly Dal was down on the other level, down on his knees, searching. And now he had reason to worry about the thumping of his heart, for there were no horse tracks here!

"Take holt," he cautioned himself. "This don't make sense now, but there's an answer some place."

Dal found the answer when he parted brush and came across another plateau strip which he might easily have overlooked. This, actually, was the strip he and Doc had seen from above.

He moved in, and a slow smile gathered about his mouth corners as he saw the deep indentations of the stallion's hoofprints.

He was still examining the tracks when all at once he spun. Again there came that deep, hollow drumming which, though in greater degree, reminded Dal of the day when first he had been frightened by the drumming of a cock grouse on its favorite hollow log. Then, as today, he had thought it was the sudden powerful palpitating of his own heart.

ELATION clashed with a sorrowing in Dal's heart as memory of the days of King, the original leader of the wild band, was revived. With this memory came recollections of the struggles of Dal and Mary and their neighbors to develop their wild homesteads at Sun Bear against the depredations of wild elements—and, more than once, against human elements which forced them to fight grimly for their rights.

But Dal shook off these thoughts and turned to the mission at hand. He was, however, not entirely able to disassociate the big handsome gray stallion from his stolen horse band. The young stock were up here in this vicinity, and if they were ever lured by this gray phantom stallion, not even their rustler could hold them.

Dal knew from experience that a wild horse band has the ability to penetrate the fastness of the mountain country's deeps, seeking out and following old game trails almost inaccessible to man. Only sudden forays by lion or grizzly could turn them back from such haunts.

Baldwin shrugged. He must get back to Doc. Tomorrow, at dawn, he would follow the tracks of the gray one. He was curious to discover the cause of those ghostly, muffled drumbeats.

As he climbed back to the camp level, Dal grinned as the tang of fragrant coffee struck his nostrils. Little Doc was hunkered down over the fire, frying sidemeat and warming up beans his wife, Marta, had cooked for him.

"How's, neighbor?" Dal called out.

Doc spun nervously. "You scairt the hell out of me, Dal," he said hoarsely. "I'm all boogered and spooked—that Green Cat, I reckon. Must take another shot of that liquid dynamite of Marta's, or shore as shooting I'll start talking back to my own self."

Shortly they began their meal and ate in silence. The hot black coffee was especially welcome. Doc had his second cup to his lips when suddenly he coughed, almost choking. For out of the northeast came a wild, strident stallion call, like a trumpeter sounding the alarm.

Dal Baldwin shuddered. Then he lifted a glance to Doc's twitching face. "That stud's in trouble, Doc. He's being hunted. We've got a lot to do tomorrow. Best bed down early, huh?"

Doc grunted. The sun was westering, and strange and weird shadow shapes were flirting with that grinning Green Cat above.

Rose-purples and mauves now deepened, and before Dal had finished feeding the stock

a quart or two of oats apiece, twilight had settled in graceful, silent majesty over the Green Cat Mountain area.

Dal insisted that little Doc bed down. Dal himself decided to stay awake. He leaned back against the bole of a spruce and attuned his mood to the mood of the rugged wasteland, now a place of mysterious whisperings and stirrings in the thickets, as night and its creatures held sway.

DAL HAD dozed. He was suddenly awakened by a wild snort from one of the horses. He reached for his Winchester which was leaning against the bole of a nearby tree, and got to his feet.

He moved silently toward the spooked stock, calling softly to them. He knew this was lion country, yet he could not conceive of a big cat attacking the camp stock, since there were many sources of food in the hinterland.

His temples began to throb, his pulses to quicken beat as at last he walked silently back to the bedground. There was no reason he could put his finger on. He'd found nothing threatening the stock.

He was tired and there was much to do with the coming of dawn. He crawled under a soogan, Dal's brows knitting in a sharp frown as he wondered who could have broken his fence, hazed his prized young breeders out.

He suddenly started, came half out of his bedding. "Sim Cashman!" he said huskily.

Cashman, former wild horse hunter, who had been hired on by Steve Rankin, Baldwin's neighboring rancher to the west. Cashman had taken up the duties of wrangler and bronc-peeler, but he had gotten into Rankin's bad books. He had been fired. More than once Dal Baldwin had seen the lean, gangling stomper in around the Baldwin pasture area.

Cashman, it had been said in bunkhouse and out on the range, was a man who had a passion for good horse stock, who would spend two weeks of stolen time out in the hills hoping to trap a likely wild colt—and who, on occasion, had fallen under suspicion of having run off and sold more than one head of Rankin's Boxed D stock.

Dal's cheek muscles began to dance. He had no proof, of course. He could only suspect Cashman. Cashman had attempted to buy a palomino filly from Dal, but had been turned down flatly. Dal's golden horses had been bred up to perfection. No ordinary thirty-a-month cowhand could afford to pay the price Dal demanded.

Dal quivered, for he knew that Cashman was a horse hunter who was well accustomed to these isolated haunts of the wild band. Here he could hide the Baldwin stock for some time, getting them out through another pass in due time. He was a man, too, who was quick to go for his gun.

Dal now turned toward little Doc who, utterly worn out, was snoring like a buzz saw with half its teeth broken. Dal sighed. He hoped, for Doc's sake especially, they would not run into any trouble—gun trouble. Doc was not as spry on his legs as he used to be.

With this host of thoughts roiling in his mind, Dal at last lay back and in due time was engulfed by merciful sleep. . . .

Dawn!

Dal awakened with a start. A low mist coiled around the campsite. Dal got from under his blankets and stooped to cover up Doc, who was half exposed.

For a moment or so Dal flailed his body with his arms, then moved in to check the horses. The pack pony was still down.

Dal dealt out a bait of grain. Then, returning to the spruces, he picked up his Winchester and sifted on through the rising mist. Shortly he was at the point at which the phantom gray stallion had so suddenly disappeared.

For all his calmness, Dal could not shake off the feeling that he was being watched. With a mirthless smile twisting his mouth, he cocked his head to search for the mountain cat, but his mists had completely screened the strange formation of timber.

He got down to examine the grass for tracks, and his eyes widened at the size of them. "As big or bigger than old King!" he exclaimed in a soft whisper.

NOW HE moved on, reached a sudden sharp slope which dipped down to a narrow box canyon. This slope was almost

completely screened by overhanging scrub brush. It was little wonder that the stallion had vanished so suddenly and completely last evening.

Down in the canyon bottom Dal felt a puff of fresh warm wind on his face. The mists were rising swiftly now, like ghost shapes, whose trains were loath to leave the earth.

A crackle sounded above, at his rear. He swung, sure that some moving creature had broken dry windfall rubble. But he failed to catch a sign of any moving object.

Now he followed the big tracks. The stallion's trail cut sharply left, in through a maze of brush toward an almost vertical wall of moss-grown rock and clay.

Dal Baldwin licked his dried lips. The tracks led into a narrow cleft in the wall, so completely concealed overhead by joined foliage that it gave the appearance of a dark, narrow tunnel.

There was a hard-packed trail into the corridor. Dal followed, his heart pounding fiercely now. Only now and then did light penetrate this strange trail defile.

Dal gave a sharp cough, which was echoed in hollow, muffled tones. Here was the secret of those phantom hoofbeats which he and Doc had heard like the throbbing of ghost drums.

In time the defile began to widen. Dal heard the musical tinkle of falling water. He came to a cut-in in the right wall, where spring water gushed down to vanish in a crevasse. He turned in to drink. His mouth had become parched.

He was wiping his mouth when suddenly he half swung. From his rear there came the muffled crack of two detonations.

Thunder was his first thought, but it was quickly dispelled. There could be no thunder in such a morning.

"Doc!" he gasped.

Those detonations, though strangely muffled, had been gunfire.

Dal whirled and broke into a lope along the hard-packed floor of the corridor. In the open, he was startled by the sudden sharp pound of hoofs. He parted brush and looked up, his jaw sagging as he glimpsed his blaze-faced bay saddler, saddled and ridden, running hard along the rimrock.

Dal swung his rifle about and thrust its muzzle up, but horse and rider had vanished.

He thought of Doc and of the gunfire. The thought frightened him. If anything had happened to Doc! Dal shuddered, then plunged on through the wet brush.

Soon he had climbed to within sight of the camp. To his great happiness he saw little Doc, his old frontier sixgun in hand, stomping back and forth in the clearing.

"Doc!" Dal called, and the little man pivoted on his bent left leg.

"Dal, boy! I done mussed up a good batch of rustler killing," Doc growled. "Jasper come in like a mountain lion mammy, ketched me sound asleep. It was that extry dose of Marta's brain p'ison I took last night done it."

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, with his saddle horse gone and all, Dal could not suppress a grin.

"I'm plumb sorry, Dal," Doc apologized. "You should've wakened me. How did you make out?"

"Did you catch a glimpse of the widelooper?" Dal asked.

"Uh, not clear, Dal. The mist bothered me. Clear enough to throw down on him a couple of times, but not to—"

"Could he have been Sim Cashman?" Dal interrupted.

DOC JERKED up his head. His eyes were batting sharply as he ground his teeth. "Why now, Dal, since you mention it, he could've been Cashman. Gawda'mighty, Dal, you shore must've come under the spell of the Green Cat to be seeing things thataway."

"I was sure in my mind before I went to sleep last night that it was Cashman who'd rustled my stock, Doc," Dal said. "I've told you how he pestered me to buy in that gold filly . . . Well, now, let's be getting along with breakfast. I'm going out alone on that widelooper's trail. You can follow my trail, huh?"

Later, as they ate hurriedly, Dal told Doc of his discovery of the escape route used by the gray stallion.

Little Doc hunched his shoulders and sly-

ly cast a glance up at the now boldly outlined Green Cat.

"If'n I ever git out of this place whole and alive, Dal," the little man whispered huskily, "I ain't ever coming back, not even for all the mountain sheep in—"

Doc broke off as Dal bounded to his feet at the sound of a shrill whinny from close in. Quickly Dal parted brush. The sun was bursting into full glory through the last lingering mist bank to eastward as Doc hobbled up to flank Dal.

Together they gasped. Standing almost flanking the great gray wild stallion, whose hoofs had drummed the ghost beats, was one of Baldwin's beautiful golden fillies.

Dal's eyes almost bugged from his sockets. He was suddenly arrested by the stallion's quick shift. The big creature swapped ends, flung his beautiful head high and gave out a long trumpeted call. Dal had swung with the point. He clutched Doc's arm as he saw his stock, with the shaggy consort mares and young stock of the wild band running hard across a flat strip beyond the canyon. Hazing them, driving them hard, was the rider who had rustled Dal's saddle bronc.

Baldwin swung. Quickly he was saddling the horse Doc had ridden. He swung into the saddle and turned.

"Get down to that corridor entrance, Doc," he called out. "Something about that entrance interestel me, but I hadn't time to examine it close. You'll see what I mean. Take an ax with you. And Doc, keep your eyes peeled and your gun handy!"

Dac waved and stomped off as Dal wheeled his bronc and sent him into a hard run along the rimrock trail, the trail of the rustler.

As he cleared the brush, he discovered that the stallion and the golden filly he called Princess had vanished. Dal groaned inwardly. It seemed unlikely now, unless a miracle happened, that he could ever recover her.

But now he turned his every thought to Cashman, horse hunter, mountain man, who knew every trick and twist of this grim wild horse country.

CASHMAN had a good running start. Dal was quickly aware of this. He ran into the terribly broken country that he knew he had to navigate by tortuous old game trails. Then he headed for that far broad ridge at which he and Doc had seen the stock being hazed.

Before he reached the ridge, Dal had to dismount and lead his lathered, weary horse. He moved cautiously in toward a fringe of scrub brush which grew in a hedge-like line along the north slope of the ridge.

Here Dal rested for a moment or so. Now and then he started as he thought he heard the plaintive whinny of a young filly. Suddenly his saddler tossed his head and snuffled hoarsely. This was no sound of alarm, but a friendly greeting. And in a flash Dal Baldwin realized that his rustled bay, a blood-brother of this brown, was not far away from there.

"Cashman's cutting around my back trail for sure," Dal told himself. He unholstered his gun and started forward.

He was moving through a small clearing in the brush when without warning a catch rope hissed and settled over his shoulders, pinning his arms.

Dal whirled and lunged, but the rope grew taut. Suddenly he heard a mocking chuckle and found himself looking into the black muzzle of a sixgun.

"Cashman for sure!" he gasped.

"Right, nester! Now drop your gun. It ain't as if you could use it, but drop it anyhow."

The big, gangly horse wrangler jerked up the tip of his gun, and Dal knew he had no alternative.

"What's in your craw, Cashman?" he asked.

"Heaps, homesteader—a real big gather. I'm going to round up the whole of your younglin' stock—and the wild band. I know how I can git to the gray stallion, too."

Dal's eyes batted sharply. He took a quick step toward Cashman. Like a flash, the big wrangler was in. He smashed the heel of his left hand hard up against Dal's chin.

The Sun Bear Valley homesteader reeled. He dropped to his knees, tried to struggle to a recovery. But Cashman was playing for big stakes, and he had to be sure he played his cold-deck ace properly.

Dimly Baldwin heard the man's mutter-

ings as Cashman trussed him up and secured him to a small tree bole.

"I'll coil in that crippled little pardner of yours when I need him," he said. "Could have kilt him while he slept, but I ain't took to carving notches in my gun—yet. May have to."

The blow to Dal's chin had also hurt his throat. He was having difficulty breathing. He was in a fog and scarcely heard the crash of brush as Cashman sent his rustled bronc off.

MISERABLE, sore and sick at heart at his lapse of alertness, Dal snapped back to recovery. His first thought was of Doc Carson. Little Doc was a fighting hellion when forced to action.

Dal groaned. He, himself, was still alive, and though incapacitated, still had hopes for escape. But Doc could be the cause of the first notch carved in Cashman's gun stock.

Now came the sound of hoofs—open, solid drumbeats, which caused Dal to squirm, knowing that the captured wild band and his own stock were milling close at hand.

He glanced up and through a port in the brush. He glimpsed the sharp outlines of the ominous Green Cat, a grinning, evil omen.

But suddenly the Cat fired him to action. Its very formation told of the struggle for recovery—recovery by those pines which had crept steadily back up the mountain face against the odds of fierce lashings by the storm gods.

The Green Cat became an inspiration. Dal worked his feet. The rope ties there were loose. Cashman had done his tying too fast.

Now Dal heaved, forced himself up the tree bole. His wrists hurt when the tie ropes caught in a knot, but he continued struggling. Biting his underlip, he wriggled his wrists and forced them up the sapling's bole. The young alder groaned and creaked. Dal was almost standing. He heaved himself backward and to one side. There was a splintering of green wood.

A broken spike of alder scored his right side, causing him to wince with pain. But as he dropped flat to his back, his bonds were partly broken. The back loop around his

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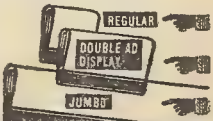


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wrists was now slack since there was no longer the sapling's bole to tauten it.

Suddenly there was a wild cry of alarm he knew must come from the big gray phantom stallion. Dal gasped. He struggled even more fiercely now. Hooking his ankle ties over the broken spike of alder, he socked back hard, and the tie was stretched.

Dal kicked several times, again and again used the broken sapling spike. Almost exhausted, he sat back. His legs were free, and with the freeing of those ties had come a slackening on his wrists. Cashman had used the one lass rope for the whole of the tying job.

As the sharp drum of hoofs intensified and the screams of entrapped mustangs and domestic colts and fillies rang through the mountain zone, Baldwin at last got to his feet, hung unsteadily for long moments while he rubbed circulation back into his rope-seared wrists and then searched for his gun.

He started off afoot. His brown gelding had either been stampeded off, or else led.

He crawled up over a huge old beaver dam. He stopped then, gasped with astonishment. There, ahead, trapped in a box canyon which had only the one narrow defile exit at the near end, milled the stock!

Baldwin watched Cashman riding in the canyon bottom, evidently gloating over his capture. Now Dal half swung and glimpsed an object fluttering in the morning wind at the neck of the defile. It was a slicker affixed to a cross of latigo-lashed willows, an effigy, the means of holding in the wild horse stock.

Even though this was an old 'scarcecrow' trick, Dal could not discount Cashman's ingeniousness.

He slid into brush, his eyes affixed to that flapping slicker. Then a thought struck him. He must steal in, break that flapping barrier down. He would free the trapped stock.

The idea startled him, for it might mean that he could lose his own herd for all time.

He had an idea that, if released, the older wild mares would at once race for the corridor, the escape route, and Dal doubted that little Doc, at the other end, could hold them. But at least it was Dal's best means of blocking Cashman's plan for wholesale capture.

IT WAS risky, crawling over a lesser beaver dam toward the exit. The sudden action of a horse could give him away and bring Cashman in gunning. But Baldwin moved on, flat to the ground.

As he was crawling over the last barrier to the scarecrow, a horse whinnied sharply from close in. Dal's heart skipped a beat.

And then there came the powerful, ringing cry of the gray stallion. Dal whirled to catch a flash of the great one—and, in his trail, the sun beating down on her lovely golden coat, saw the Princess.

Almost instantly Dal heard the ghostly drumming of hoofs. The stud had called to his band, then whirled to race into the escape corridor.

Dal worked swiftly now. He threw caution to the wind as he rose, ducked in and hurled his full force against the vertical willow holding the slicker.

It crashed! So did Cashman's rifle. A bullet screamed over Dal's prone form. But he seized the lashed cross and backed away.

Again and again Cashman fired. Dal groaned as he felt the slap of lead in his left upper arm. He had no opportunity to get hunkered in cover and return the fire, for now, screaming, an old lead mare of the wild band was tearing toward the narrow exit, leading the band out of the trap.

Dal was heading for the brush, diving across a small open space when Cashman's rifle blasted. Brush was cut at Dal's head, only inches away. He still had another two rods to go when suddenly, above the noise of gunfire and thundering hoofs, there came a familiar detonation. It was the roaring blast of Doc Carson's old .45-90.

Dal Baldwin almost sobbed as he hit the brush. He lay there breathing hard for some moments before he dared move.

Now he turned, sucked in a long breath and got to his feet. He parted brush, his gun at the ready.

His heart beat a savage tattoo as he watched two of his colts streak on into the gaping maw of the corridor entrance. A low groan escaped him. For now he thought for certain that with the big gray stallion in the lead, the entire band would be taken miles

[*Turn page*]


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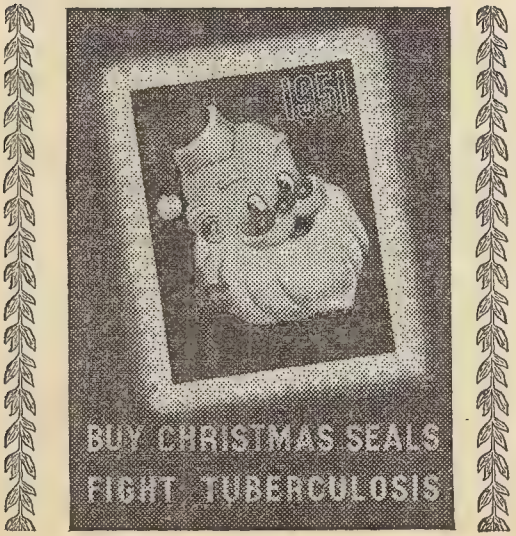



away, through trails which only the gray phantom and his mares knew.

Suddenly Dal gasped. His eyes almost bugged from their sockets as he glimpsed little Doc Carson, crawling along the near side of the farther beaver dam.

Dal wanted to call out, but checked himself. Doc was headed toward the defile, toward the box canyon trap.

A GUN CRASHED. Doc sagged. Dal's heart skipped a beat, but he saw the little man rise, lay his heavy old Winchester on a hummock. There was a gush of flame, a terrific blast. Dal even saw the heavy recoil punch Doc's slender shoulder back. And then, to Dal's relief, he saw Doc rise and stand, his left leg bent.

Dal loped forward, stumbling, calling as he plunged on. In a moment he had caught up to his friend. Doc's mouth was parted in a wide grin which gave the strong sunlight full play on his gold teeth.

"Doc!" Baldwin's voice was scarcely audible. "What in thunder's gone crazy, or is it me? How come you're here? What about Cashman?"

Doc stowed a fresh cud of eating tobacco securely inside a check. His eyes batted with pride as he stomped a step or two away, then back. Now he jerked the muzzle of his rifle forward.

"There's the wide-looper hunkered down, nursing his gun arm, Dal," he said proudly. "I only winged him. Took some shooting, too."

Dal's lower jaw sagged as he saw Cashman, his back against a moss-grown boulder, head sagged forward, holding his right elbow in his left hand.

Dal turned to Doc for further enlightenment. There was a deep frown on Dal's weary features.

"Talk some, Doc. How come you got here, when you were supposed to be at the other end of the escape corridor?"

Doc spat an expertly aimed stream at a root. He gave a hitch to his sagging gunbelt. "Like you said, there was something strange about that entrance at the other side of the big hill, Dal. I figured that corridor to be an Injun hoss trap. I was right. It

was plain that a gate had been rigged there one time, many year ago."

"Doc!" Dal's eyes were alive with interest. "You mean you—"

Doc coughed, almost choked on his tobacco in his moment of great pride. "Reckon you're ketching on, Dal. Shore. I rigged up a big X gate, lashed it with a catch rope. And when it was ready, I pushed the pack pony in ahead of me, rigged the tie of the gate inside."

"Inside?" Dal asked.

"Why yeah, Dal. How in heaven's name could I have set it from the outside, then got in with the cayuse? I anchored the rope around a big rock outside, took the end in and made the tie in—"

"Doc!"

"Yeah?"

"That means—that means the stock's all trapped in the corridor now!" Dal almost lost his voice in his excitement.

"That's right, Dal, and you'd best be getting over to that opening afore the stud starts backing the bunch out. I'll mosey along and see Cashman don't come to shooting life." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe that leering Green Cat ain't been such a bad critter after all, huh?"

Grinning, Dal showed full agreement. He turned and strode hurriedly on to the corridor entrance where the smell of horse was strong—and welcome.

THE SUN was westering, playing tricks with the great Green Cat above, as Dal Baldwin and Doc Carson sat opposite Sim Cashman. Doc had fixed up a hot meal which was welcomed by all. He had rendered first aid to Cashman, got the rustler's arm slung in his own private spotted bandana. Dal's own light wound had received aid.

Dal now turned to Cashman. "Ever occur to you that it's much safer, better over the long haul, to play 'em square, mister?" he asked.

Cashman grunted and took a long drink of black coffee. He glared across at Carson, then shifted his gaze to Baldwin. "What d'you figure on doing?" he asked gruffly.

"Doc and I have talked it over, mister.

[*Turn page*]

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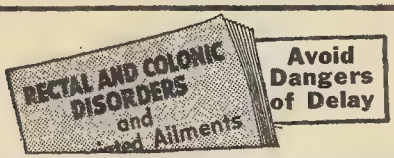


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"You mean you ain't taking this to the John Laws?" Cashman interrupted. He half rose, but winced with pain as he moved his wounded arm.

Dal Baldwin nodded and turned to Doc for confirmation. The little man grunted. "You might easy have kilt Dal," Doc said. "And I ain't forgetting you could have kilt me while I slept—and didn't. I'm siding Dal. We're turning you loose."

"That's it, Cashman," Dal added. "But get this straight. We're sort of putting you on parole. You show up around the homestead valley or Boxed D range again, unless your business is legal, and you'll be either kilt in your tracks or run in to Sheriff Frank Syme up to Cody. Make your choice."

Cashman's head had sunk low, but now he raised it. His dark eyes were alive with a new light.

"Okay," he said. "But I'll be loose, afoot, in this mountain country. I—"

Dal interrupted, shaking his head. "We'll leave you the pack horse," he said. "We figured your own bronc, probably carrying a Boxed D brand, broke a leg and you had to destroy him. But you've got the saddle cached some place. Right?"

"Right enough."

"Okay, then. We'll leave you a cached gun, your own rifle and a grubstake to carry you till your arm mends. Then it's up to you. I'll expect you to return the pack pony when you're fixed to git along without her. Understand?"

The man nodded. He started to say something, but the sudden drum of muffled hoofbeats stopped him. His jaw sagged as he turned toward the corridor.

"What—what d'you figure to do about the stock you got trapped in there?" he asked.

Baldwin smiled. "At dawn we cut them loose, mister. You can set by and watch. The wild band will go free, but we take my stock into a gather. You, if you've a mind to, can go ahead and see what you can make of capturing the big gray and his band."

DAWN HAD scarcely pushed aside the drapes of night when Baldwin and Doc were astir. Dal moved in and patted his recovered geldings. He talked softly to them. "Got to be good this morning, boys," he said. "Got to show your training, cutting at your best."

Within an hour, Doc and Dal were mounted.

Dal moved in and pulled the temporary block clear of the northerly exit of the corridor. Almost instantly, with a wild scream, a shaggy little mustang mare lunged to the open.

Dal yelled as a Baldwin colt emerged.

"Take him—Doc!" Dal called, and little Doc neck-reined his brown gelding over and headed the frantic little colt on toward the neck of the defile.

One in! It was a start.

Now the stock came plunging out, nostrils flared red, snorting, and skilfully Dal and Carson cut out the Baldwin stock.

Dal twirled his catch rope. His eyes were wide, his lean face twitching as the ghostly drumming of huge hoofs pounded. Then, her dead high, beautiful creamy mane pennanting in the morning wind, the Princess palomino broke.

Dal heeled his bay, swung his rope and cast. It was a perfect catch! The Princess sagged to her haunches. And with a wild scream the big gray phantom stallion broke to the clear and hit brush.

Dal Baldwin shook as he rode up to join Doc Carson on guard at the entrance to the box canyon trap. Dal shook with an elation that affected him from head to foot. On a lead rope, tossing her head, snorting, lunging, backing, came the reluctant prize filly.

The job was done. Dal finally got the spirited two-year-old snubbed in close to his bay's off flank. He dismounted and beckoned to Doc.

Little Doc rode in, and Dal shook his friend's gnarled hand warmly. "Thanks, pardner," he said huskily. "I don't think we lost more'n one head or so, huh?"

Doc nodded. "But I never thought I'd see the day when a rider could make a catch like you done on that there Princess filly, Dal," the little man said.

[*Turn page*]


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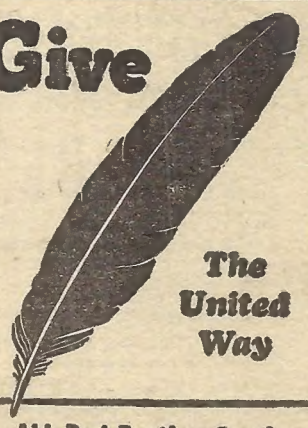

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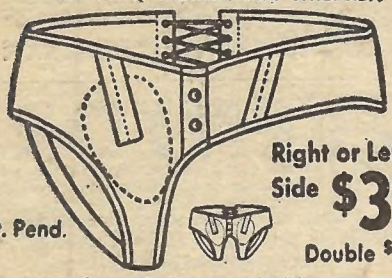

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"Thanks, Doc," Dal said shyly. Praise from Doc was praise indeed, for usually little Doc was in the habit of helping himself to a major share of the plaudits for any joint achievement.

"Now let's be seeing about the home trail, neighbor," Dal said. "We'll cut Cashman loose with the little paint mare. As soon as the young bunch here has settled and the wild band is well away, we'll go. I'll lead off with the Princess—she seems to have a powerful influence. Okay?"

"Dal, I—uh—" Doc broke off, coughing sharply.

He was staring up, bug-eyed, at the Green Cat, whose body was now moving, alive, as the solid timber swayed and rippled in a strong topside breeze.

"Yeah, let's git the hell home, Dal," Doc added hoarsely, "afore yon mountain critter really comes to life."

He turned away and rode on to stand at the defile. Dal rode back a ways to turn Cashman loose.

"So long, Cashman," Dal said softly. "Try and make a go of things, huh? I ain't threatening you no more, just asking. Sabe?"

The man nodded, got to his feet, slung a trail sack of food over his good shoulder, then strode on to unhitch the little paint cayuse.

Into the strengthening sunlight, with the mincing palomino filly behaving nicely, Dal led his recovered band on toward the home trail. On they went, toward the beautiful Sun Bear Valley where anxious kinfolk and neighbors would be waiting, watching, as so often in the past years they had waited and watched for their menfolk.

In the rear, slumped in his saddle, little Doc Carson ground steadily, happily, on his chewing tobacco. Only now and then did he turn and gaze at the shape of that big Green Cat.

Suddenly he started at an eerie, drumming sound. He froze, then all at once grinned as a pompous ruffed grouse flew out of a patch of scrub brush. He coiled his bad leg around the saddle horn for ease and rode on, his eyes staring into the back of his greatest friend, Dal Baldwin, ahead. • • •

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